Short Stories

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A mystery in high country

THE MESA OF LIONS

Stephen Chalmers

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER
CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLHOFF

HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON

Eighty Years of Gun Production

THE Harrington & Richardson Firearms Company has been and still is one of our most successful gun producing firms. Yet the majority of our gun historians have completely ignored this great company. You can search many of the popular and so-called standard works on arms makers and find nary a word about H & R except a listing of gun models that are being manufactured at the present time!

In the past the Harrington & Richardson Company has specialized in producing good reliable handguns, rifles and shotguns in the medium- and low-priced field, as well as certain high-priced arms. If it had not been for H & R, many of us, at one time or another, would not have had the pleasure of shooting, due to lack of money for high-priced guns! This is one of the many reasons for the success of this company!

On the other hand, H & R has manufactured some of the most expensive sporting arms ever made in this country! For instance, in the 1880's H & R was the sole manufacturer licensed by the English firm, Anson & Deely, to make the famous double shotgun under the Anson & Deely patents! At that time the Anson & Deely guns were considered the best on the market and commanded the highest prices! This is a good indication of the reputation for ability of production and reliability that H & R has enjoyed through the years—as it is pretty obvious that a concern such as Anson & Deely could not take a chance on having an inferior product of their development put on the market! But, I'm getting ahead of my story!

Frank Wesson, brother of famous Daniel Baird Wesson (founder of Smith & Wesson), was busy making fine rifles and pistols when his nephew Gilbert H. Harrington, at the age of 26, invented the first shell ejecting revolver. In 1871 a partnership was formed to develop, produce and sell this new arm. William A. Richardson, who had been working with Harrington at the old Ballard & Fairbanks plant (manufacturing revolvers) was placed in charge of the mechanical end of the business.

Frank Wesson became increasingly interested in the production of his target rifles and in 1874 Harrington bought out his interest in the revolver manufacturing business and a new firm was founded under the name of Harrington & Richardson.

The policy of the new company was to produce in quantity a good reliable revolver of latest design, at a popular price. This marked a new era in the manufacture of revolvers. Constant improvement of the Harrington revolver made it one of the most desirable of handguns. As a matter of fact, at that time it was the only revolver in which the cylinder could be loaded and the fired shells removed by the sliding ejector, without removing the cylinder or detaching any portion of the arm!

This convenience of rapid reloading made it very popular and as a result the H & R product had a ready sale, not only in this country but abroad as well.

When the Centennial Exposition was held in Philadelphia in 1876, the infant arms company was but two years old, yet its proprietors with their usual energy and foresightedness prepared a very impressive display case containing twenty-four beautifully decorated Harrington & Richardson revolvers. This revolver-filled case, which is a real eye opener and attracted a great deal of attention at the Exposition, still in its original condition and with its contents unchanged, is on display in the Company's reception lobby in Worcester. I recently had the pleasure of examining it and would recommend that the next time you are in that vicinity, drop in for a look-see!

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I. C. S. training was his

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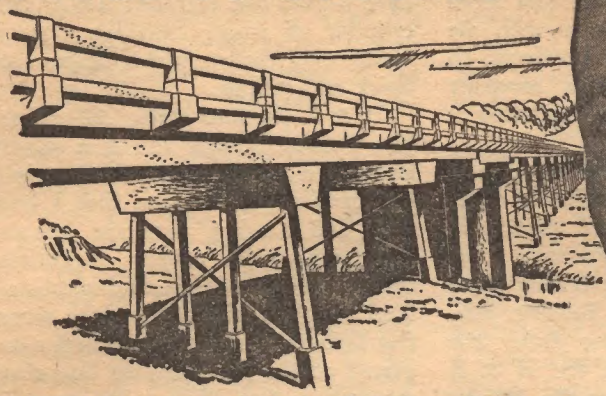

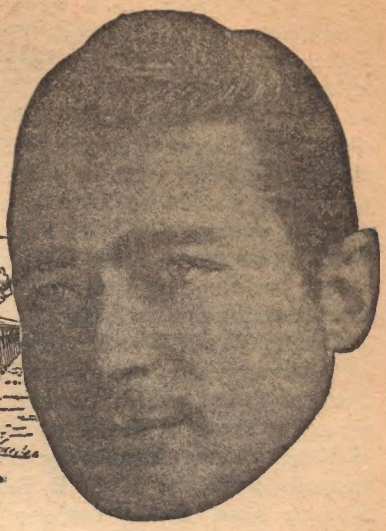

HAYDEN M. HARGETT took his first I. C. S. course while he was still a student in high school.

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(*Continued from page* 4)

With two years of successful manufacturing experience behind them, and practically an unlimited field before them, larger quarters to care for expanding business became a necessity. Larger floor space was obtained, and as the years went by more and more space was needed to keep pace with the growing demand for H & R revolvers. In 1890 plans were made for a company owned building and land was purchased at the site of the present factory.

During World War II there was a complete conversion to the production of Government orders which covered practically the entire range of the better known types of Small Arms. Outstanding among these weapons were the H & R Reising Submachine Gun and Automatic Rifle, the H & R Throwing Gun Kit, the H & R Defender Revolver, as well as the Marine Corps .22 caliber Semi-automatic Training Rifle. For excellence in production, H & R received the coveted Army-Navy "E" five times, and in addition the company also received the United States Marine Corps Special Commendation Award!

Besides doing development work for the Government, Harrington & Richardson is producing a line of sporting arms in the medium- and low-price range.

Three types of .22-caliber revolvers are in production. My favorite is the very accurate Sportsman Model 999. It's top break, nine shot, with automatic ejector and it may be fired either double or single action with regular or high speed .22-caliber long rifle, long or short cartridges. The Sportsman was designed for target shooting as well as general use and I carry mine almost constantly here around the farm and in the woods for pest extermination and general shooting. It's a mighty nice revolver for the very reasonable price of about $45.

The Models 922 (blued at $27.25) and 923 (chrome finish at $29.75) are large comfortable grip, nine shot, solid frame revolvers made with either 6- or 4-inch barrels. These are accurate well-made guns selling at a very low price to meet the demand for an all-purpose handgun.

The 922 Bantamweight is a handy little (20-ounce) .22-caliber revolver with 2½-inch barrel utilizing the regular frame and nine-shot cylinder, but with a small grip for compactness and ease of carrying. The Bantamweight is ideal for the hunting pack or tackle box and altogether is a very useful little arm.

The H & R revolvers of the 922 series have a push-pin extractor which clears the cylinder of empty cartridge cases in one quick, easy thrust, which makes reloading quick and simple.

H & R produce three, .22-caliber rifles. The Pioneer Model 765 is a self-cocking, bolt-action, single-shot rifle that is one of the handiest of its type that I have ever used, and is a fine "first rifle" for most any youngster—with proper supervision, of course. Incorporated in its design is a "Redi-feed" loading platform, which means very fast loading. The bolt is opened, a cartridge placed on the platform, the bolt closed and its ready to fire! With a little practice, this rifle may be fired almost as fast as a repeater. It's accurate, and sells for around $15.

The Plainsman (Model 865) has all the desirable features of the Pioneer single-shot, plus the advantages of a repeater. It sells for around $22.

The Leatherneck (Model 150) is the sporting version of the Marine Corps training rifle. It's a five-shot semi-automatic, taking either regular- or high-speed .22 long-rifle cartridges. This sturdy action withstood 144,000 rounds of continuous firing without disassembling for cleaning. We certainly have a lot of plinking fun with my Leatherneck rifle, and have worked out a number of shooting games for it—later on, I'll tell you about some of them! Also, the Leatherneck makes a very fine small-game and varmint rifle. It's very fast handling and a good shot, using high-speed, hollow-point bullets may successfully take varmints up to and including fox! I would recommend the rifle with micrometer rear peep sight, at $61.75. With regular sights it sells for $57.

H & R also makes two model shotguns and a starter's pistol, I haven't had a chance to shoot them as yet, so will give you a report at a later date.

If you want a complete catalogue write to Harrington & Richardson, Worcester, Mass.

Good shooting—and I'll see you next issue!

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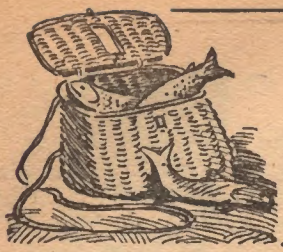


THE MESA OF LIONS

By STEPHEN CHALMERS

CHAPTER I

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

ROSS McLAREN had no reason to forget his first night at the ranchhouse of the Arrowhead outfit. Not that he had any particular reason for remembering it, either; but—you know how these things are.

A sound, a smell, or a trivial happening curiously touching the sense-memory, such as animals have, is apt to mark some particular time, place, or incident indelibly; to make an imprint which will become firmly set in the mind's associations.

It was after the supper. The foreman, Pity-All Plutarch, had come over from the bunkhouse to talk with the boss, Tom Brewster, and his guest, the San Diego doctor who was a "fool for trout-fishin'."

Secretly Pity-All had hopes of a little game—even three-handed. But for the moment the trio sat before Brewster's blazing, open hearth; for the nights are snappy in Oro County, even in May, especially during a desert norther.

Mrs. Brewster—the rest, residue and remainder of the family—had gone to bed immediately after washing up. She maintained that it was enough to feed and sew for the men without having to listen to them.

The desert wind had been blowing dry and gritty all day. After sundown it came dustier and stronger, grittier and drier, but with an icy chill in it. It was the sort of wind that makes men irritable and women nervous. Knowing that, the Arrowhead outfit simply avoided all controversial matter until the softer, smoother wind blew again from the Pacific.

But it was a fine night for a murder or a ghost-story. Nobody offered to fulfil in either case. But Plutarch, the foreman, after a dusty-dry whine about the ranchhouse, broke a momentary lull of the conversation with a remark.

Quoth he solemnly, "Heaven pity all pore sailors at sea on a night like this!"

Ross McLaren, the guest, stared. But Brewster chuckled. To the young San Diego doctor the rancher said, "He ain't never been nearer the sea than he is right now, excep' one time he goes to Los Angeles and is inveigled into a day-trip excursion to Catalina Island.

"Accordin' to the way he looks when he gets back here, his liver has been on a rampage an' won't stay set even now. Accordin' to what he says, it must ha' been the wust storm ever hits the California coast in four hunder' an' seventeen years! Comin' an' goin' it rages, this here tempest, an' it's all included in the roun'-trip ticket at reduced rates."

Pity-All Plutarch, with no apparent animus, unfolded and refolded his long, booted legs. He seemed about to register a carefully thought-out come-back.

But all at once he froze in his seat, as did Brewster. Both sat perfectly still, both staring at the fire, but with the air of faculties alert and trained in quite another direction.

McLaren froze in another sense. His scalp suddenly crawled. His blood chilled

From the Range Below, the High Mesa Loomed Dark, Mysterious and Impregnable

momentarily and little goose-flesh pimples prickled all over his back.

Down the icy wind, blowing from the wide Mojave desert through a pass hedged by snow-capped peaks, there came a long-drawn cry—half human, half animal.

"Good God! What's that?" whispered McLaren in the pause following.

"A mountain-lion," said Tom Brewster.

But he was frowning and making haste to knock out a well-going pipe and repack it.

At the same time he glanced challengingly at Plutarch.

" 'T ain't!" said Pity-All bluntly.

"All right, all right," said Brewster hurriedly. To McLaren, he said at a tangent, "So you plans to take all the trout out of the Rio Pueblo?"

"Eh?" ejaculated McLaren, somewhat startled.

Ordinarily he would have leaped to the subject like a trout to a Willow-Fly in May. But that cry, Brewster's irritation at Plutarch's blunt asseveration, and the rancher's haste to turn the conversation—the whole incident had gripped him as with cold talons reaching out from black nowhere.

Sternly putting aside the invited and inviting subject of trout, in which he was an expert as well as a fool, he deliberately asked, "Are there mountain-lions around here?"

Well, it happened that Brewster was like any other rancher in that section on the subject of the cougars which annually leaned heavily on the debit side of cattle-raising.

"Lions!" he said with a harsh guffaw. "Oh, no! They ain't no such animiles around here. My calves—colts, too—just tears 'emselves up between sundown an' sunrise. They gets over-exuberant, ye might say, an' just bites pieces outa themselves for fun! They ain't no lions around Arrowhead!"

"Then it wasn't no lion—that time!" said Pity-All Plutarch triumphantly.

BREWSTER caught in the trap of his own irony, floundered for a way out.

"Well, now, I ain't sayin' that mightn'ta been a sorta lone example—a kinda—"

"Well darn yuh, Plutarch!" he broke off furiously. "Get it off yer chest, same way you springs that stuff about pore sailors whenever a stranger an' a wind blows in the same time. Go on an' narrate, darn yuh! Go on an' narrate!"

"I aims to narrate nothin'," grumbled Plutarch. "When a fella narrates things he's us'ally lyin—speakin' general. All I says is —it ain't no lion. Leastways, it weren't no lion in the beginnin'."

"Who's hedgin' now?" crowed the boss. "But go on. If it weren't a lion, what in thunder was it?"

"They's somebody up there—on the Mesa

of Lions," said Pity-All Plutarch with a stubborn note.

The rancher tamped his burning tobacco with a calloused forefinger, drew a few puffs to see that it was drawing well, and subsided into his chair with a comic sigh of resignation.

He had heard Plutarch's story some fifty-nine times—about hearing cries at intervals and once seeing smoke over that mesa where no human foot was supposed to have trodden or to be able to climb. But Brewster felt that for the sake of his guest's entertainment he might be able to stand the narration a sixtieth time.

"My hands is up!" said he with a wink at Ross McLaren. And to Pity-All, "Shoot, Plute!"

But to the surprise of the rancher at least, the foreman with the odd sobriquet apparently was not rising to the fly—as McLaren mentally put it—that night. Instead, the cattleman who pitied all poor sailors on a sea with which he had little or no experience, remained for a few seconds staring at the open fire.

Again the desert wind howled mournfully about the house.

Then the foreman said, almost sepulchrally, "I aims to ask this here gent a question."

"Yes?" said McLaren, eagerly, expectantly.

"In the best circles," said Pity-All solemnly, "of San Diego, f'r instance—is holdin' a roun'-the-corner straight punishable by death, or only losin' the pot?"

Before McLaren could reply, Brewster sprang from his chair with a loud laugh that had a note of relief in it.

"Thank the Lord!" he exclaimed. "Call in Shorty, Plute, yuh ol' hypocrit', an' we'll make it a foursome. And heaven pity all pore pikers on a night like this!"

CHAPTER II

THE DOCTOR GOES A-FISHIN'

TOM BREWSTER called the game off before midnight. Not because he had lost a few dollars to Pity-All and the cowboy, Shorty, but that McLaren had been losing more than he thought any guest of his should.

But the limit had been low and McLaren was a good loser. And he admitted with a laugh that he didn't always play such a rotten hand.

"Fact is," said he, "my mind hasn't been on the cards at all."

He glanced at Pity-All as he said it. That person had been banker and was carefully computing the treasury at this moment. The rancher caught his guest's look and understood.

"Maybe it's part of his game, darn him!" he confided in a loud voice. "Not to tell you the yarn, huh, then play poker? I wouldn't put nothin' by Plutarch Cummins when he gets to hearin' human cries an' pityin' pore sailors!"

"Speakin' uv me, boss?" asked Pity-All with mild surprise, as he finished checking the bank's account to his own great personal satisfaction.

"Oh, I'll get that yarn out of him some time!" laughed McLaren. "Then I'll clean him up at his own game."

"Shore! Any time—any time," murmured Plutarch.

Shortly thereafter the lights went out in the ranch buildings of the Arrowhead outfit. As befits cattlemen, they were early risers, even if occasionally late sitters.

As for Ross McLaren, he planned a start as soon as it was light enough to travel. His creel and rod stood ready for action. The rest of his outfit, also in order, would consist merely of a compact cook-kit no bigger than a canteen, a few strips of bacon and a first-aid case which fitted to his belt along with his automatic pistol and hunting-knife.

Tomorrow he hoped to fulfil a dream; the dream of every fly-fisherman—to wet a line in pools where trout have never seen the shadow of a human being.

A physician and surgeon of San Diego, he was a friend of a friend who could ask any favor of Tom Brewster. Hence the sporting doctor's welcome at Arrowhead Ranch.

For the rest, McLaren was still on the sunny side of thirty, and, although his type of good looks—a masculine blond—had hatched many feminine designs upon his bachelor state, between his profession and his love of fishing he had so far escaped the wiles of the fair.

Arrowhead Ranch was situated peculiarly between mountain, desert and sea; a situation which not infrequently occurs in Southern California, especially around Oro County. Just imagine the backbone of the coast range tailing off in rocky vertebral joints—somewhat disjointed—to where the Mojave Desert, back of the range, merges with the alluvial lands sweeping to the sea and is kept more or less green by sea-fogs.

But more than the sea-fogs made a cattle-ranch possible there; for the Rio Pueblo, coming out of the rocky vertebrae in two forks—fed in turn by a dozen little ones—formed a fair-sized stream a mile back of the Arrowhead ranchhouse.

It was the formation carved by the two forks ere they joined at the base of the so-called Mesa of Lions which suggested the outfit's brand in the beginning of things.

The two forks of the Rio Pueblo, wearing their way out of the rocky range through thousands of years, had left standing between them an arrowhead-shaped mesa. The point of this, just where the north and south forks merged on the west or sea side, was a sheer high precipice like nothing so much as the prow of a mighty ship.

The two forks had worn a deep gorge on either side of this point. These stream-courses spread backward between unscalable precipices, widening toward the range heights in the shape of a V, or an arrowhead with the point downward.

The top of this mighty V was the Mesa of Lions, considered unget-at-able as a general thing. At least, nobody was on record as having tried to get on top, for the probable reason that there was no motive on record for anybody so risking his neck.

Formations of this nature are not infrequent throughout the West and Southwest.

Plutarch Cummins, foreman of the Arrowhead outfit, was perhaps the only one who ever seriously talked of getting up there some day—some day! But some day is always slow of coming around when other matters of everyday are more urgent. The fact of the matter was that the Mesa of Lions simply piqued Pity-All's curiosity and fascinated him for several reasons—three reasons, to be exact.

First—once from the high elevation of another vertebral joint which he had climbed to see if it led anywhere, he had seen timber and green brush on part of the unscalable mesa across the gorge.

Second—on another occasion he had seen what he thought to be a thin wisp of smoke up there.

And third—it had just been some weeks before sight of the smoke wisp that for seven or eight nights in succession, he, Brewster, Shorty and others of the outfit had heard the half animal, half human cry in the night. Always it was in the night, never in the day; for which reason the rancher said "lions."

Only Plutarch held out that it was a human being. Hadn't he seen smoke? But nobody else had. And Plute was a stubborn hardhead once he got an idea under his sombrero. Plute and his "lost soul" on the mesa got to be a standard outfit joke, like his pitying of all poor mariners when the wind howled in the night.

Still, for quite some time after that week of nightly argument, the Mesa of Lions had come in for a good deal of attention. The Arrowhead boys, whenever they reached a point where a good view of the mesa could be obtained, scanned it keenly. No one but Plutarch ever saw smoke, and Pity-All himself had to admit that he saw it but once and never again.

In time the matter was almost forgotten by all but the foreman. The rest of the outfit kept off the subject when he was anywhere near enough to step forward and restate his convictions. The general belief was simply that there never had been any smoke up there. Plutarch had doubtless seen a light mist steaming up from a spring. Probably there was a small waterhole up there, to judge by the light timber and the green brush. The existence of this growth nobody denied, because everybody had seen it at various times.

Brewster himself was of the opinion that the mesa top could be reached by way of some of the other rocky spurs. From the top of these doubtless a man could make his way along the backbone range, descending to the mesa from it.

But to what end? If cattle strayed it

would be wasted time and effort to look for them there. Even if the beeves were foolish enough to travel that circuitous and dangerous route to a patch of green and a water-hole—leaving better feed and drink below—the lions would see to it that they never reached there.

And if they did reach—

"It would be a dinner party for the varmints and fine pickin's for the buzzards!" said the rancher. "If you was to ask me, Plute, I'd say that that mesa desarves its name. It's a fair breedin'-ground for lions!

"Eh? Wha's that? How does the brutes get up an' down without goin' away back an' around?" This was in reply to a question raised by Shorty. "Don't ask me. But they goes. An' a cat can crawl where a goat 'ud get the dizzies. Besides, I've trailed lions right into the ravine either side and lost the tracks on the dry rocks, or where I couldn't go no further."

"So hev I!" grunted Shorty.

So much for the geography of an odd bit of country which now little interested anybody except Pity-All Plutarch and Dr. Ross McLaren, save as its name was anathema to the Arrowhead outfit—the Mesa of Lions!

McLaren's interest was mainly that peculiar to his avocation. The mutual friend, Bill Thayer, whose note of introduction had brought the angling doctor to Arrowhead, was also a devotee of a fine art which is a form of mild insanity—fly-fishing.

"Ross," Thayer had said, "the fishing in the Rio Pueblo is fair—just fair. But every so often you make fast to a two- or three-pound rainbow that fights like a cold-water *salvelinus*—fights its full weight, and then some. Not like those old daddies you sometimes hook that have escaped for years by luck and are too old for prolonged fight.

"These prime trout I'm telling you about come down the two forks with the heavy freshets and maybe stay around until next spawning-time or the water gets too warm for their liking. Or possibly they just can't get back!

"They're up there, boy—the main family!" confided the enthusiastic Thayer. "Up those two forks. If only a man could get up there without breaking his neck, shades of the late lamented Izaak, he'd hit the tallest fishin' ever dreamed of the night before trout-opening!"

And Ross McLaren, due for a few weeks' holiday, had joyously taken Thayer's letter to Tom Brewster, his hopes pitched high —*to cast a fly in virgin pools!*

What cared he whether Plutarch had seen smoke? Or if the cries he had heard were human? He hoped the foreman had not seen smoke! He hoped, as the rancher and the rest believed, that that mesa was inhabited by nothing but lions.

The more lions the merrier! For the more there were of them the less likelihood that a human had ever strayed there to disturb them—and the trout. For, strange as it may sound to some, mountain-lions are even more shy of human beings than the speckled beauty of the stream.

Despite that the curious impression made by Pity-All Plutarch's hints lingered for nearly an hour after he turned in that night, and also flitted in and out of his dreams, at the first clash of the bar on the wagon-tire—the clarion rouser of the Arrowhead outfit before daylight—Ross McLaren was first in the cookhouse.

Before the cowboys were half through breakfast he had gulped down coffee, mush and bacon and, munching biscuits as he traveled, was on his way.

By the graying light of dawn he headed toward the point of the arrowhead—the junction where the north and south forks of the Rio Pueblo came out of the supposedly impassable gorges where the great trout lurked.

On the traffic principle of keeping to the right, he chose the south fork and—started into the biggest adventure of his life!

CHAPTER III

HARD GOING!

McLAREN, pushing his way through the willow forest covering the lush ground where the streams converged, found and entered the mouth of the south fork.

It was, as Thayer had described, a gorge hemmed on both sides by walls of broken or water-worn rock. It was a terrific defile

with an impending avalanche on either hand.

Down the middle bottom flowed the tributary stream, sometimes quite invisible under fallen rocks; here and there finding holes where it visibly brimmed in foaming pools—tortured water seizing momentary respite.

As scenery, the place was not alluring to the doctor, but to the angler there was a lure about the possibilities of those pools —farther up.

With his rod still cased he carefully worked his way up-stream, clawing around ledges, frequently climbing the face of the right-hand precipice in the hope of better going. The left-hand—the mesa side of the fork—was as yet quite impregnable.

The going became worse, but the prospects of trout-fishing more inviting with every difficult step. Five hundred yards he gained. Then he was stopped by what, after some study and a few vain tries, seemed an utter *impasse*.

There appeared no way over, or around, a shoulder of sheer, solid, water-worn rock. The stream fell over the middle of it, high up, and dropped in thinned spray into a deep pool below. To the right of the water-course, where it slid over the high lip, the rock curved up till it became perpendicular, with not a seam, crevice or break in its smoothness.

But that pool! It made up in large measure for the disappointment of being blocked. It was a deep, wide, round basin of swirling, black water patched with eddies of white foam. And it was accessible!

Only twelve feet below where he was standing, and two feet above the surface of the pool, on the side nearest to him, there was a broad slab of flat rock. This extended, almost like a rude sidewalk, right across the stream, passing under the waterfall where the rock surface was slightly hollowed and slimy from spray.

He could even have whipped that pool from where he was. But how could he land a trout on light tackle at this height if the fish should prove to be what he hoped for? And something about that pool—or was it angler instinct?—told McLaren that a king among rainbows lay there, nosing up the falls which even it could not negotiate.

To drop ten feet and land on that ledge was easy. The only question was as to getting back up the smooth face of it.

Caution said, "Safety first!" Sporting instinct whispered, "Don't be a quitter!"

But—and sporting instinct was pleading hard against caution—that slab extended across to the other side. It would be no jump across that water-worn runnel below the falls. He might slip on the spray-slime, but a ducking has ever been part of the angler's game—something to be expected and taken philosophically.

"Let's go!" he muttered.

He let himself down easily over the edge of the great, smooth boulder upon which he had been standing, speculating. Adjusting his creel and other accoutrements to obviate an unexpected pitch forward, he let go and slid.

He landed squarely on his rubber-soled feet. Then quietly he sat down, gently removing his creel. After extracting what he wanted from the latter he covered the basket's visibility by placing it behind him.

"Maybe I scared him in that drop from skyline," he thought. "But he'll forget it in a few minutes."

He filled and smoked a pipe, carefully shielding the flame with his hands and being particular not to throw the match-stick in the water. It was fully five minutes before he uncased his rod. With the same slow, deliberate movements, he jointed and strung it, taking all an angler's anticipatory delight in the testing of a leader and the selection of an initial fly.

As it was still gloaming in that ravine and duskier still in this rock-walled, water-floored "room," McLaren tied on a Coachman for a wet-fly cast.

After a few false casts he dropped and trailed the bright little bunch of feathers. There came an iridescent flash from the depth—of something that seemed to McLaren as long as his own arm.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed. "Wow-*ee!*"

He cast again. Again the flash, but the giant trout turned once more, utterly scorning that fly. It was given no chance of a third refusal of the Coachman. The little red, brown and white bunch of feathers with its peacock body was withdrawn from the game.

After another wait of five minutes the

doctor tied on a Professor selected from the dry-fly box. The little gray-and-gold fly hovered over the dark pool for a few seconds, the invisible tapered line and McLaren's skill making it perform all the uncertain gyrations, dives and lifts of an insect at loss for a safe course out of an aerial blind alley.

Then the fly's wings hit the water, seemed to flutter in an effort to get clear of the wet disaster, spasmodically struggled, floated still for an instant, and—

Out of the depths came that king of rainbows and triumphantly leaped into the air, carrying the dry-fly with it! It struck the water again with a plangent lunge; felt the prick of that insect snare and delusion; shot in air again, shaking its head in an effort to dislodge the fly; leaped again, twisting its glistening body so that the latter's weight might fall upon and perhaps break the hair-leader which was attached to the untasty morsel.

Then, failing in both efforts, it settled down to flight!

The details of that battle with a five-pound cold-water rainbow you may find in Dr. Ross McLaren's little pocket volume, "Lure of the Brook." This is the tale of something else which he presently and quite unexpectedly caught on the fly.

Anyway, the sun was shooting across the top of the ravine, lighting the ridge on the north side and the top of the Mesa of Lions, when Ross McLaren brought that rainbow to the net.

"Well," said he to nobody but the outdoor gods, when he had done admiring his trophy, "that's good enough for one morning. It proves Thayer right!"

It did. But the extended fishing would have to be in the north fork on the other side of the mesa, above the junction at the arrowhead point. For clearly the south fork was inaccessible above this pool where he had caught the great trout of greater promise.

With the idea of retracing his steps to the junction and exploring the other fork for better going and deeper accessibility, Ross McLaren unjointed and cased his rod and fastened his creel shut. The latter was never built to hold that trout which, still buckled, he carried in the landing-net.

Standing on the slab he negotiated with his eyes the smooth boulder down which he had slid to victory. Presently he discovered, as many another general has done, that his victory was like to cost him dear in the retreat. It did not take him two minutes to decide that he could not get back—the way he had come, at least.

The top of the boulder was ten feet up from the slab ledge. He could throw his creel, his rod-case and the net with the fish in it up and over. He could himself jump and possibly touch with his hands the top of that ten-foot height, but the edge of the boulder's top was rounded and smooth. There was nothing for his fingers to take hold on.

To attempt a jump for such an uncertainty of grip would be dangerous, possibly resulting in a fall into the pool or—infinitely worse—to a backward crash of his head or spine against the solid rock of that slab.

"Well, anyway," he said, still elated over his trout, "I can cross to the other side on this slab, work back to the junction and wade across the stream where it is more easily fordable down among the willows. But that's just if I have to. It's the nearest way to the north fork I'm looking for."

He cleared the moss-slimy hollow of the slab without slipping, and found himself on the other side—actually at the base of the wall of that unexplored mesa. He had no present ambition to climb up there and be the earliest explorer. His whole thought was on fishing—and to make sure he could get back to Arrowhead Ranch whenever he wanted to.

So he began to work down the mesa side of the ravine.

He had not made fifty yards before he found that the going was worse than his up-course on the other side. In fact, he came several times within a hair of breaking a leg, or his spine, or his neck before he came up against another *impasse*.

His next thought was to get right down into the stream-bed and follow it to the junction, swimming where necessary and scrambling over the rest. But here again he was confronted by the impassable. Despite the fact that he was overheated from exertion, taking to the ice-cold water did not daunt him. But from the ledge where he surveyed the situation below and be-

yond he quickly perceived that it would be even more dangerous—savoring of the actually suicidal—to attempt scrambling over and sliding down falls where the rocks were greasy from water-slime.

Besides, there were these places where rock avalanches had piled in the streambed and the river was a lost thing underneath.

"Oh, well, it's all in the game!" he laughed. "It wouldn't be a virgin stream if it was easy to get at, or get out of. And the day's young, anyway!"

He retraced his steps to the pool where he had caught the big fellow, although there was no use trying there again. But it was a point from which he could at least make a fresh start.

"Short of growing wings or fly's feet, there's only one other possibility," he said to himself. "I've got to get up on the mesa top, cross over it to the north fork and see if I can get down that to the junction."

At the outset this course appeared quite feasible. The Mesa of Lions did not seem impossible of scaling once one were on the mesa side of the forks—the south fork, at least.

Probably the general idea that the mesa was inaccessible arose from the fact that hitherto no one had stumbled on a way to cross either of the forks. Ross McLaren had stumbled on a way simply by luck and the lure of a particular trout-hole. And he couldn't get back, at that!

But from the mesa side of the crossing rock-slab the ravine wall sloped up at an angle of perhaps sixty-five degrees. The face of the great mound at this point was a pile of broken rocks, with patches of loose stone-wash and here and there outcroppings of bedrock.

The sun was now slanting more into the ravine and striking this slope fiercely.

Delaying only a few minutes to regain his breath, and still carrying his precious trout in the net, Ross McLaren started up the broken rock-face.

The climb was easier and less perilous than he had anticipated. It was slow and hard work and the sun was scorching, but his progress upward was steady.

He had climbed, as he calculated, almost four hundred feet when the loose boulders became fewer, the sliding pulverized stone less treacherous and the general footing firmer and less precipitous.

Presently he reached a broad ledge of rock—a formation so perfect that it might have been designed by man and laid in concrete.

It was quite spacious, affording a fine lookout of the ridge across the south fork and the alluvial lands beyond, the latter merging into desert to the eastward. To the southwest he could even catch a glimpse of the blue scimitar-like edge of the Pacific horizon—about fifty miles away.

The ledge was backed by two rocks like inverted pyramids leaning against each other. Between these, at their base, was an angular opening—an artificially-formed cave-mouth.

McLaren chuckled to himself as he moved forward and peered into the deep recess behind this orifice.

"If ever I get the law on my heels," quoth he, "I'll know a nice place where I can hide and feed on large trout. The law couldn't even get across the fork, and—"

But the refuge selected for that possible fugitive period was already preempted by an outlaw. From the depths of the recess, which twisted away into blackness at the rear, came a low, warning snarl. At the same time Ross McLaren detected an odor which was not altogether unfamiliar. Yet it was only the accompanying snarl that jogged his memory to a fruitless mountain-lion hunt with dogs—back in the Simi Hills of Ventura County.

As the snarl was repeated McLaren backed away, his automatic out and ready.

"All right, Old Whiskers! All right!" he muttered. "I've no desire to disturb the family or spoil your beauty sleep after a night out."

He delayed not in going away from that rock-ledge, moving around and past it with a wary eye over his left shoulder and fixed on that cavern-mouth. The mountain-lion—for he knew by the odor what was behind that snarl apparently was not anxious for trouble just then, either. It did not come out.

Five minutes later Dr. Ross McLaren found himself on top of the mesa. Not until then did he experience the thrill of something he had been too preoccupied to

remember. He was actually on top of that which supposedly no man had ever negotiated. He had reached the plateau which was the subject of much argument among the Arrowhead outfit—the plateau that had been colored in hues of mystery by Pity-All Plutarch.

He was actually on top of the Mesa of Lions!

CHAPTER IV

A BONE AND A TRAP

FROM the mesa McLaren at first discovered nothing particularly interesting except the view. It was like standing on a peninsula of the world from which one might look down upon three sides of the rest of the earth. Cutting across the horizon before him was the distant Pacific, from which a day-breeze was setting in. The usual three-day period of desert wind was ended. In the middle ground was the alluvial slope common to the coast. Along the center of that, a wisp of steam over a thin line running parallel with the sea brought into visual being the railroad. This line led the eye to Pueblo, the nearest town, about ten miles northwest.

The mesa itself was more or less rocky and arid except near the middle of its upslope to the vertebral ridge. This latter, where it backed the mesa, was almost vertical and a terrible mass of gigantic piled boulders and pinnacles of rock. But in this middle ground, between the apex of the mesa and the backbone ridge, some timber and brush appeared, neither any too well nourished, but suggesting the presence of water, perhaps underground.

McLaren was not here in search of scenery, however. He had come upon this excursion to establish fact about these trout. The sample in his net satisfied him on that point. He dressed out the fish while resting.

His intention—now that he was on the mesa top by accident—was to see if the north fork were fishable over a greater length of course than the south, and at the same time discover if he could get out that way. To get out, of course, was the main thing, although he was not yet worrying about it. The day was still young. He could still find pleasure in the contemplation of further fishing before becoming overly anxious about his exit. He had been in tight places before and serenely gone on fishing. Always there had been a way back—a way out.

When he had done dressing the fish—which, with its head and tail removed, he could now pack in the creel—he got up to look around for some dry grass in which to wrap his trout against moisture. He was cutting some dry wiry grass with his hunting-knife when he discovered, half-hidden among the tuft—a bone.

Now, in Southern California—in any part of the Southwest, for that matter—a bleached bone is as little to be remarked as a common stone. Whitened bones may be said to have become part of the landscape throughout the cattle country, or a country that had had cattle even a hundred years before.

But McLaren was a surgeon. And this bone caught and held his eye as if it had been a precious stone or a rattlesnake. At a glance he knew it was no animal relic. To be exact, it was the femoral bone of that which had been a human being!

McLaren straightened up with a queer thrill. It was not merely that the bone was of a once fellow-mortal. Human anatomy was to the doctor as much a matter of unemotional fact as an arrangement of type to a printer. But all at once it came back to him—the deep impression made by Pity-All Plutarch's desultory hints about dark mysteries at the Mesa of Lions.

A week or ten days' of cryings in the night—sounds Plutarch maintained as human, against the others' arguments for lions. Then the foreman's statement of having seen smoke on this mesa.

How long ago had that been? Plutarch had not said. And there was no telling from the bone when the tragedy of its owner had occurred. Two years before, at least. It was bleached enough for that, or longer.

Suddenly alarm touched McLaren's senses for the first time that day. Perhaps this had been some hardy adventurer who had found a way on to the mesa—and no way back. Perhaps, two years from now, some other hardy, or foolhardy, adventurer might find a human bone here and say after the manner of the grave-digger in "Hamlet," "This will have been the skull of an *angler!*"

When he looked around further and discovered no other human relics McLaren felt certain that, whatever the beginning of the tragedy, the lions had been in on the last act. Probably the bones of this unknown were scattered all over the mesa. Possibly the other femoral bone was back in that den about the south fork—a plaything for a lion's cub to whet its teeth on.

He placed the bone out of sight under an adjacent rock, marking the place with his eyes in case— Well, it is always advisible to make a mental note of what one does with a find of this sort!

Then Dr. Ross McLaren, his mind filled with a conflicting of interest—and a kind of fear?—started across the mesa toward the north fork.

He did not go out of his way to investigate the timbered area, which was a bit to the eastward, up the slope. He wanted to get to that other fork quickly and discover now —before all other things—just what his situation was in the matter of getting out of this land-trap.

He was not long in establishing that he had a problem before him. The situation on the north side of the mesa was similar to that on the south—only a little worse.

True, from where he was, the bed of the north fork was accessible—more so than on the other side, at least. For here the mesa sloped down more gently, and on almost grassy ground, to the bottom. From this mesa side, once one were on it, almost the whole of the north fork could be fished.

But toward the apex the mesa's gentle slope curved inward and upward like the bow of a battleship, the point of the cutwater—or arrowhead, as before described—forming a sharp, thin, almost vertical line.

McLaren retraced his steps when he found this out and descended to the north fork from the point where the slope was easy.

At the stream-bed he discovered a chain of brimming pools which were teeming with great trout. These fish, despite the now bright day, were still "rolling" and that this discovery did not elate him in the least awakened McLaren to a realization of the panic which had subconsciously seized him.

"This won't do!" he said out loud. "I've got to get my nerve back or I'll make a mess of what looks like a ticklish situation."

To regain his equilibrium he deliberately picked out a comparatively soft and willow-shaded spot near the brook and built a little fire of dry grass and brush sticks—a fire just big enough to leave a bed of hot ashes upon which to fry bacon strips and some of that trout.

After his meal and a few draughts of Adam's ale he further disciplined his nerves by calmly stringing up his rod and fly-casting for a half-hour.

"Find the way out, Ross, as you've found a way in," he said to himself. "And you've got an angler's paradise all to yourself—and Bill Thayer, of course!

"Now to find that way!"

He had been throwing his trout back as fast as he caught them. They could live for another day if he himself lived to see it. Otherwise, what sense in taking them?

Now he packed up, slung his creel and net, tightened his belt and, using his rod-case as a slight staff, started for Arrowhead Ranch—some way or other.

It was now about an hour past noon.

An hour spent in exploration of the descending stream-bed itself proved conclusive that there was no hope of exit by the gap of the north fork. The walls on either side were perpendicular and the bottom infinitely worse than at the mouth of the south fork. The waterfalls were higher and deeper.

Back up the stream he traveled to where he had lunched. The ridge oposite that point was all but vertical. In fact, the whole spur facing the mesa was unscalable, while the mesa slope itself was here a bit of mere hill-climbing.

But from this point the stream-bed climbed abruptly. Farther up it appeared to McLaren that the mesa top and the opposite spur closed in together and almost merged. Probably they became one back there in the ragged vertebral range.

"I'd hate to have to go away up there and around," muttered the angler-adventurer. "Probably that's how that poor devil got in. Maybe broke a leg and couldn't make it back. But it'll have to be that way if a short cut across doesn't show up.

"But," and he shivered at the prospect of cold—and lions, "this begins to look like a night out for me!"

He climbed the comparatively gentle slope to the mesa's top. This he followed up toward the backbone range until he found

himself traveling along the edge of a gorge which separated the mesa from the coveted opposite spur only by about fifteen feet.

"So near and yet so far! Ahead, the ascending terrain, despite that the stream gorge promised to shallow and merge its two sides as the stream thinned toward its sources, became more terrible and more impossible for human travel.

To go around the top meant high chances of a broken leg or a twisted ankle. That would be the worst that could happen!

They might hear his cries, of course, and the Arrowhead outfit, missing him, would not this time put them down to lions. But how could they reach him? And how with a broken leg, say, could he reach them?

"Show me a place narrow enough for even a long jump, and I'll risk it!" McLaren decided.

But no such place appeared immediately. The sides of the slot-like gorge still kept from twelve to fifteen feet apart. The abyss between was cut so deep from countless years of grinding freshets that although it was only about four o'clock in the afternoon, he could see the black channel of water below only by the churned white foam.

Four o'clock! He had two hours before darkness. But even if he could get around where the ridges, or spurs, merged, he could not now hope to make the descent from the ragged heights to the alluvial plain in daylight. It would be madness to attempt it in the dark.

Then he remembered the area of brush and timber which he had seen when he first reached the mesa top. In his meanderings he had half circled it. Now he discovered it about half a mile over to his right—southwest.

"Well, if it's got to be camp for the night," he said, with a lightening of his heart, "that looks pretty good. Maybe though, between Plute's tales of cries and smoke and my bone find back there, I may discover somebody living around that green bit who can explain a few things—but probably won't, any more than he's likely to welcome a stranger!

"All right!" he went on, talking quietly to himself. "All right. I'll just have to chance the Wild Man—if he's there. But now that it's all night for me and I've two hours' leeway before dark, let's just look a bit farther. I'd sleep better to know there is a way out."

And five minutes later—he found it.

CHAPTER V

THE FEATHERED BARB

AT FIRST it was a discovery as astonishing as the finding of the femoral bone. And at first it offered, as a way out, as much of a problem as McLaren had encountered that day. At a point where the gorge closed in to a width of about eleven feet, on the opposite wall and descending into the slot-like abyss depended—of all things—a rope-ladder.

"In the name of the improbable!" gasped McLaren. "What—in—thunder!"

Now there could be no doubt that the mesa was inhabited by more than lions. With the realization came the conviction that whoever lived here and had devised this ladder, so carefully let down when not in use, would offer no great hospitality to anyone stumbling upon his secret retreat.

Instantly McLaren re-made his plans. He had no desire to be silenced for his intrusion. Besides, this ladder, and the bone, and Pity-All Plutarch's suggested tale—the latter proved probably true in every detail—piqued his curiosity to a high pitch. To get away from the mesa without his having been on it discovered, and to come back for further fine fishing, with a mystery as an added lure—this was what possessed McLaren's every faculty now.

But how to get that rope-ladder up! It did not occur to him just then that, without some simple contrivance, this other human user of the mesa must always be confronted by the same difficulty himself.

All McLaren could see, or think of just then, was that the rope-ladder was hanging down the opposite wall and that it was quite out of reach. Its upper ends, on the opposite side, were made fast in some hidden way among the rocks.

On the mesa side, where he was standing, there must also be some means of readily securing the rope-ends.

He looked around and was not long in discovering, despite that they were partly concealed, two short posts of dried live-oak protruding from the ground a little behind him.

The posts were ringed smooth from encircling rope-strain.

"I—see!" muttered McLaren. "And that ladder being down on the other side means that *he*—whoever he is—lives on the mesa. For his pull-up must be to the side he's on."

He studied the puzzle of how to bring that rope-ladder up and across the abyss for fastening. The thing which naturally suggested itself as the designer's probable contrivance was a cord attached to the ladder's lowest end and threaded loosely across to the near side.

McLaren dropped to his knees and peered down into the narrow gorge. So dark was it down there that he could scarcely see the ladder's end, let alone a string of cord. Neither was there any sign of such a thing anywhere about the ledge around his knees.

"It's here, though—must be!" McLaren reasoned. "But I've got to move a bit faster if I'm to get across and make the Arrowhead before dark.

"Of course, come to think of it, it's May, and it won't really be dark before six-thirty. And there's a bit of a moon. But—"

Then he chuckled and became extremely busy, unslinging his creel and jointing his fishing-rod.

From his flybook he extracted the biggest fly he had—a bass number four, with a heavy gut leader. He had not fished for bass in years—having abandoned that game for trout exclusively—and both fly and leader were old.

But he would make a try.

He had no doubt of his ability to hook the ladder. He could hit an orange at forty feet after casting a few times to get that much line off the reel. But in the present experiment it was the tenth or eleventh cast before the feathered barb struck at an angle which sunk the hook into the rope-ladder.

Once he was fast, he began stripping the line with his hand instead of reeling, holding the pole low to offset the strain.

The ladder came slowly up and toward him. His heart sank as he felt the weighty pull of it between his fingers. Would the line—would the dried-out gut and old fly—hold?

The line and the rod came level. He could pull no more. He tried to raise the rod so as to bring the ladder toward him on the angle. But the rod, though of the best make, was never built for that job. It bent in a half-circle without breaking, but without bringing the ladder near enough to grasp. And further strain would be disastrous.

"I'll climb the pole!" McLaren chuckled, remembering a trick of his boyhood when he had no landing-net and the fish was too heavy to swing to the bank.

Retrieving the line until it was taut and the pole again aligned with it, he laid the split bamboo on the ground and worked it back of him until the tip was under his hand.

Then he took hold of that line and gently, steadily, drew on it.

Now was the supreme test of that old gut leader and pensioned bass-fly!

The ladder came to within four inches of his outreaching left hand. His fingers were all but closing on it when—

Snap!

The ladder dropped back into the abyss with a bass-fly and a strand of raveled gut on it.

Instead of swearing, however, McLaren began to laugh. He was laughing at himself for his earlier stupidity.

"Why didn't I think of that!" he exclaimed. "He buried it, of course!"

As he was reaching for the ladder end his eyes had seen it—a cord attached to the rope-bridge's end and describing a parabola below before it ascended to a point on his side. Quickly McLaren began to tear away the dirt, gravel and stones a yard or so on either side of where he was kneeling. He found it—the cord ascending from the abyss—neatly buried at the edge of the mesa side.

The doctor gave a pull on it. The cord came out of the earth like a buried wire, or fuse, its concealed length extending right back to one of the sunken posts.

"He's cautious—what?" McLaren chuckled, as he pulled up the ladder and made it fast.

Five minutes later, after a perilous crawl over a sagging, wobbling rope-bridge, Ross McLaren found himself on the opposite spur which swept down in a rough but steady slope to the alluvial plain about Arrowhead Ranch.

He glanced at his watch. It lacked twenty minutes of five o'clock. He still had about two hours of fair daylight to travel by. And —this was the main thing—he had avoided

that circuitous and probably terrible journey up around the rocky vertebral range and back down again.

Swiftly he ascertained that the ends of the ladder on the spur side were here, as on the other side, made fast to hidden, sunken oak-posts; also that here again a buried cord controlled the lifting of the suspension bridge when it was down on the mesa side.

"He must have done some tall traveling back and forth around that hell-range before he completed this cut-off!" McLaren mused.

For a moment he was of a mind to let the bridge down from the side he was now on. But he had no desire to convey to the human denizen over there that someone other than himself had been on the mesa and left it by the secret short-cut.

There was, of course, no way of releasing it on the mesa side, so that it would hang as McLaren had found it. That end was made fast. And a rod and fly-line, even in the hands of an expert, cannot untie knots!

No. He would leave the bridge stretched. Perhaps the mystery inhabitant of the Mesa of Lions would think that he himself, incoming, had forgotten to release the mesa end. Possibly the mystery inhabitant would remain on the mesa for several days and, not having to use the short cut, would not come near it to discover its unusual position. Perhaps he would not come to it before Ross McLaren himself came back, recrossed to the Mesa of Lions and let down the mesa end.

Coming back he was, too—for various reasons. But for the present he must reach the Arrowhead before dark.

As he turned to go his eye caught a slight movement among the rocks on the mesa level opposite him. McLaren's hand reached swiftly to his belt for the automatic sheathed there.

But then his hand dropped and he laughed with a note of almost relief.

It was not a human being. Only a long, tawny creature which, after a quick side-glance at him, slithered away among the boulders.

"Only a lion!" muttered McLaren. "And I'd like to lay fifty dollars to a nickel that it isn't the worst inhabitant of that mesa!"

Then he started on the rough but comparatively easy trip down the spur to the plains and Arrowhead Ranch.

CHAPTER VI

PLUTARCH BRINGS THE MAIL

IT WAS not the following day, but the second after his adventures about the Rio Pueblo, that Ross McLaren returned to the Mesa of Lions. On the following day he had been too stiff and sore to be over-ambitious about anything calling for physical energy.

It had been quite late when he reached the ranch buildings of the Arrowhead outfit. The going had been rough, though not impossible, calling mainly for caution and slow travel. And the moon's first quarter was in the sky to help out on the last leg of the trip. The outfit had been greatly worried for an hour or more, when he turned up to relieve their anxiety for the tenderfoot. Tom Brewster and Pity-All Plutarch had even been discussing the chances of a search-party meeting with any success.

"If he don't show up pretty soon," the rancher had been saying, "we'll have to make a try anyhow, though I don't see what we can do but holler and shoot guns."

"Meanin'—if he's up there?" Plutarch said darkly.

"You know darn well what I mean!" snapped Brewster irritably. "If he's busted a leg in either of them gorges, how in tarnation we're to get at him, or how in hell, gettin' at him, we're to get him out—"

But it was just then that the missing man walked in.

McLaren looked tired—dead beat. His clothes were torn and his rubber soled shoes were considerably cut and frayed.

"Hello, there!" said the rancher, casually to cover his relief. "Had any supper? Or was you figgerin' on cookin' up them big trout you got?"

"I didn't bring any trout," said McLaren quietly as he rid himself of his creel and other impedimenta.

"No luck? Aw, well," added the rancher consolingly, "I didn't expect ye'd get much further up-stream than Thayer did."

"Oh, the fishing's good," said McLaren. "But I threw them back."

"Yuh—*what?*"

"Threw them back. Couldn't tell how long it might take me to get here. Had no fancy, either, for dressing out a mess tonight. I've had a full enough day."

The rancher grinned and winked at Pity-All. McLaren caught the wink.

"Oh, nothing like that, Friend Brewster! If you think that's a fish-story I'll bring you a sackful any time—if you'll do the dressing-out."

"You got to show me, young feller—you got to show me!"

"Keep your pan well greased, then. Today was just giving things the once-over."

"See any lions?" asked Plutarch, who had been studying the tenderfoot's face in an odd way.

"Oh—one or two," was the offhand response.

"The hell yuh did!" exclaimed Brewster.

Then he, too, became aware that his guest was either preoccupied or too tired to talk. Or maybe he wasn't the talking kind.

"Well, I guess you'd like to wash up. An' Ma Brewster told the cook to keep some grub hot. Too tired for poker after?"

"Too tired for anything," said McLaren frankly—and the rancher liked him the better for his honesty. "I'll wash up, eat and turn in. And if I don't wake up when One-Lung whangs the wagon-tire, don't even come to see if I'm dead!"

Within an hour he was asleep in the guest-room of the Arrowhead ranchhouse.

He was not conscious of whether he was alive or dead until awakened next day by a shaft of hot sunlight and the sound of Shorty cursing a refractory mule. When he got out of bed he felt fine, except that he was stiff all over. Even his neck seemed brittle.

"Tomorrow's soon enough," he allowed, "especially if I have to make good on that greased pan. Here's hoping the Wild Man of the Mesa doesn't find his bridge strung at both ends in the meantime."

He spent most of the day lying on the ground in the green coolness of a eucalyptus windbreak back of the ranch buildings. In the afternoon Pity-All Plutarch found him there and brought some mail. Most of it was redirected from San Diego, but there was one package directly addressed in the hand-writing of his friend and fellow-angler, Thayer.

By the feel of it, it was a book.

"Maybe he thinks I'll be needing one!" snorted the doctor.

Pity-All seemed in no hurry. He squatted on the ground by the recumbent convalescent and produced the makin's.

"Pretty rough stuff up there, doc?" he asked.

"A cross-section of the inferno," was the reply.

"How far up did yuh get?"

"Oh—all the way. Crossed the south fork, got on top of the mesa, went over that, crossed the north fork and came down the spur t'other side."

Pity-All stopped in the act of rolling the cigarette and stared.

"The hell yuh did!" was his whole-souled expression of admiration. "Well—I—be—*dog—goned!*"

After a pause he got the cigarette alight. Between puffs he asked, "See anybody up there?"

"Not a soul."

"Didn't hear nuthin'?"

"Heard a lion snarl in a hole and plenty of water running. The rest was silence."

"Any spring over by that timber and brush?"

"Didn't investigate it. Will, though, another time."

"Oh? Goin' up ag'in?"

"Tomorrow."

Pity-All Plutarch took the burning cigarette from his lips and thoughtfully studied the little wisp of smoke spiraling up from it.

After a bit he said, "I'm real pleased to have had this leetle talk with you, hombre."

"Any particular reason?"

"It sorta eases muh conscience."

"About what?"

"Poker," was the unexpected reply. "It sorta correcks muh judgment, as yuh might say."

At first McLaren was puzzled. Then, understanding the implied compliment, he laughed.

"I get you, I think. Don't worry! I aim to remove your back-teeth—tonight, Plute!"

"You can't. Ain't got none!" chuckled Pity-All. "But what in thunder ailed yuh? A man as drops three-of-a-kind when I

draws all four is either feeble-minded or needin' a new backbone."

"Darn you!" laughed McLaren. "I didn't know half the time what anybody drew. That stuff about cryin' in the night—up on the mesa. How long ago was that, Plute?"

Again Pity-All surveyed the San Diego doctor with a slow, searching, but quite inoffensive gaze.

"Oh, there ain't no story to that," said he. "No more'n I said. It's over two years ago, I reckon. I hears it one night—and all that night, too. It comes reg'lar, every two-three minutes. Don't sound like no lion to me. It gets feebler 'bout mornin'—changin' some, too, like the feller is getting dry from hollerin'.

"In the mornin' I looks up at the mesa, but don't see nothin' onusual. But I ain't satisfied. I gets the boss's glasses an' goes up that spur you come down last night. I does it on foot, havin' less respeck f'r my own legs than a hoss's. Don't see anythin' oncommon through the glasses, either, when I gets up where I can look over most of the mesa. I think maybe the feller's dead. After, I does another think—when it's too late—that maybe he's down in one of the fork-bottoms, tryin' to find a way out.

"But I'm foreman here an' got lots to keep me busy. Maybe it was a lion at that, though I'm one of them holds lions don't make no noises, excep' when they're mad or wounded. Next night, though, I hears it again. The same cryin'—reg'lar—every so often. But it seems further off, or maybe the feller's gettin' weak. I speaks to Brewster, Shorty and the bunch, tellin' them there's a man up there. They kids the life outa me. Says it's lions—or 'pore sailors'—darn their hides!

"Still, we all keeps a sharp eye on that mesa. We don't see nothin' more'n ordinary—at that time. It bothers me to know, if it's a man, what he does in the daytime, when he's as mum as a settin' jack-rabbit. Maybe he ain't hollerin' for help a-tall, but to scare off the lions in the night-time, an' he's too tired by mornin' to do much but sleep till it comes 'round lion-time ag'in. But if it's a man, he's sure gettin' weaker. Every night I hears it. By now they all say it's lions, an' I get tired sayin' 'tain't. Every night for a week, maybe. An' every night it seems further off—fainter.

"Then I don't hear it any more."

Pity-All fell silent. McLaren shivered.

The latter had a mental picture of a man—injured, perhaps—and the tawny bodies slithering among the rocks.

"And the smoke?" he asked after a bit.

"Oh, that was weeks after," said the foreman, "and it couldn't hev been the same feller—even if it wasn't a mist. If I coulda been sure of one or t'other—the man or the smoke—but I ain't."

"You didn't try to get up on the mesa?" McLaren said tentatively.

"Sure! Come near breakin' my neck tryin'. But I couldn't make it nohow, excep' it might be done by the spur to the north and down off the back range.

"But that's an all-day job, at least—an' I'm foreman here—"

"Too bad!" muttered McLaren.

Pity-All Plutarch said nothing at once, but the other's remark obviously disturbed him.

"I done my best," finally he said simply. "An' I wasn't any too sure—"

"I can't blame you—under the circumstances."

Plutarch got to his feet, preparing to go. But suddenly he turned. Standing with his long legs slightly apart and his hands on his hips, his six feet-odd inches towering over the recumbent doctor, he stared down into McLaren's eyes, his own troubled and searching.

"Hombre, did yuh see anything up there—*onusual?*"

"Yes," said McLaren quietly.

"Was it—human?"

"Yes—in a way."

"Livin'?"

"No."

"I knowed it!" muttered Plutarch with a kind of groan. "Pity all pore—"

He caught himself in time. For the rest he merely echoed McLaren's previous remark, "Too bad!"

He asked no further questions, for which McLaren was glad. The doctor was not ready to tell all he knew—or thought—about the mesa and its probable living inhabitant. Tomorrow he would resume his investigations between interludes of catching that mess of trout for the outfit.

In the meantime, Plutarch gone, he looked over the mail the foreman had

brought. Certain letters of businesslike appearance he resolutely pocketed unopened. He was on holiday. Only that which was personal and likely to be pleasing claimed his attention.

The last thing he opened was the package from Thayer. Sure enough, it was a book, but a curious book. Apparently it was home-made from the covers of some other book, the original title pasted over with thick yellow paper. On the latter a substitute title and other matter had been rudely lettered by hand.

On the outside cover appeared this legend:

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT FISHIN'
by
ROSS M'LAREN, M.D.

Inside, the book contained about a hundred pages which were blank, except that each had a large interrogation mark on it!

"The son of a gun!" chuckled Ross. "Wish I had him here—for that little poker game. I'd teach him what I know about that."

But when evening came, in Thayer's absence he took it out of Pity-All Plutarch, Tom Brewster and Shorty after Ma Brewster had gone to bed.

When the game broke up about eleven p.m. Shorty appeared depressed. Brewster looked highly respectful, and Pity-All, gloomily checking up a seriously depleted bank treasury, said sepulchrally, "Now my *eye-teeth's* gone!"

CHAPTER VII

M'LAREN FIRES A SHOT!

THE dawn of the second day after his first excursion up the headwaters of the Rio Pueblo found Ross McLaren again sliding down the face of the boulder in the south fork. This time he had few misgivings about getting back. There was the rope-bridge. If the ladder were still up it meant probably that the mystery inhabitant of the mesa had not been near it and had no inkling of any intruder.

Even if it had been discovered and let down, the "wild man" might have attributed the circumstance of its being up to his own forgetfulness. If it was down, why—McLaren would just haul it up by the cord!

Of course, there was always the chance that the man of the mesa had discovered it and did suspect the truth. Whether the unknown, himself, thereupon left it up or down, he might now be lying in ambush with a high-power rifle, awaiting the intruder's return.

So McLaren, after much thought, had decided to make his second entrance to the mesa by the way he had made his first, despite that the easier and more direct way was by the accessible spur to the northwest and over the rope-bridge. He felt that, until he knew more about the person back of that short-cut contrivance, he had better observe caution. Better to come from an unexpected direction upon that possible watcher with the possible high-power rifle.

He did not fish the great pool in the south fork that morning. He had promised a mess for the outfit and had brought an empty flour-sack in lieu of a creel. He would do all his fishing in that fine string of accessible pools in the north fork.

He wasted no time in getting up on the mesa, judiciously avoiding as far as he could that ledge and cavern where he had disturbed a drowsy lion on his first visit. As he climbed to, and crossed, the mesa to the north fork, he saw no lions, but many signs of them—mainly tracks.

He passed the spot where he had found and hidden the femoral bone. The doctor again satisfied himself that he would have no difficulty in finding that bone any time he might want it. He did not go near the small timbered area in the upper center of the mesa. That, if anywhere, was where the mystery inhabitant might be encountered. McLaren was not yet ready, or anxious, to meet him. He wished, first, to be better informed of the situation.

But before fishing he made a wide half-circle which brought him to the vicinity of the rope-bridge. Keeping as much out of sight as possible, and moving with extreme caution and alertness of eye and ear, he satisfied himself that the rope contrivance was still stretched just as he had left it; also, that no one was on the watch.

The mysterious inhabitant must be still at home, and probably had not been near the bridge in the meantime.

So far, so good! The question of how long he, McLaren, could use that ladder without that use and his presence on the mesa being discovered he left to answer itself. Possibly he might find another way in and out.

But—now for one grand morning's fishing in those wonderful pools of the north fork! This day he must combine business with sport. He was fishing for the greased pan. The outfit must neither be disappointed nor doubtful of his prowess as an angler. They were already satisfied on the point of his poker-abilities.

As it was still early he decided to go down the north fork as far as the going would allow and then fish up-stream as far as he might. In this way he would be working all the time toward his exit-point—the rope bridge.

This plan he put into execution. Within two hours, working upstream, he had that flour-sack as full of excellent trout as it was comfortable to carry. But when he had dressed out and repacked the fish, he found that he could add a few more. So he prepared to whip a further pool or two before crossing the chasm and getting back to Arrowhead with his mess.

But at the very next pool up-stream he received another surprise. It was of a kind that did nothing to lessen the mystery of the Mesa of the Lions. To reach the pool he had to climb the side of a rock-shoulder to his left and slide down on the other side. When he reached the shoulder and glanced down on that other side, he just looked once and quickly dropped back to cover. Sitting on a rock at the head of the pool below was—and he could hardly believe his eyes—a woman.

Yes, a woman! She was a mere girl, at that, in slimness and beauty; but she was in the first glory of womanhood none the less. At first he thought she was an Indian squaw, on account of the darkness of her face and bare arms, and of the fact that the only covering of her head was a mass of shiny, blue-black hair, drawn back from her forehead and plaited in a thick rope. This was draped over her left shoulder and lay in a small coil in her lap. Her outdoor garb looked worn and had been patched many times.

She was sitting on the rock with a crude fishing-pole in her hand when McLaren first glimpsed her.

But now she got a strike from a trout. She rose to her feet and essayed to do battle with an unusually large rainbow. She had neither reel nor spare line, the latter being simply tied to the crude pole. The big trout, failing to break the coarse, heavy line, broke itself loose, probably tearing its mouth ligament in getting free.

As the fish tore loose the girl uttered an exclamation of petulance more than disappointment:

"Oh, hell!"

McLaren was astounded, but he grinned nevertheless. He could understand that, with the crude outfit she was using, large trout must be the bane of her fishing!

But as she stood there ruefully examining her hook to see if it had survived, McLaren watched her—mystified, fascinated, puzzled what he should do next. She was right in the path of his progress up-stream and toward the rope-bridge. She had rebaited her hook with something she took from a small can and had again cast into the pool.

And then, while he was debating whether he should show himself, or try in some way to circle past her without being seen, one of the mesa's less unexpected inhabitants decided a course for him. There had been another interested observer of the fair fisher-girl. At sight of it McLaren's hand went swiftly to his belt and came up with automatic pistol in it, his thumb simultaneously unlocking the "safety."

The thing must have been stalking her. It suddenly appeared on a rock not fifteen feet above her, nor ten feet behind. There it flattened a tawny body on the rock-top and laid a head, catlike, over the edge. It remained thus for a few seconds, motionless, its eyes fixed upon the unsuspecting girl by the pool underneath. Suddenly it haunched its hind-quarters, bringing itself slightly forward and to a more crouching attitude.

McLaren, who had rested his right elbow on the rock where he lay and taken a hair sight on the animal, pulled the trigger at that suggestive moment. The sharp bark of the automatic seemed to be simultaneous with a horrible scream from the mountain lion. It leaped in the air with a

grotesque, twirling, twisting movement—not unlike that of a battling trout in its first wild leap.

Then it came headlong down, struck the face of the rock heavily, slid down in a limp, tumbling, loose heap and fell right beside the girl—motionless—dead!

At the shot and the lion's scream the girl had dropped her fishing rod and sprung to her feet. Now she was standing up, her hands clutching at her breast, her eyes staring in affright, not at the dead lion—at which she gave the merest glance—but at the high rock where a man in khaki outing dress was standing with an automatic poised in readiness for a second shot.

"I guess he's dead," said Ross McLaren, coming sliding down the rock and approaching the pair, his curiosity evenly divided between his first lion and the girl of this strange mesa.

She was still staring at the man, with no apparent interest whatever in the lion!

"Glad to have arrived in time," said the man. "In another second he'd have landed on your neck."

"Who?" said the girl, glancing around with renewed alarm.

"The lion," said McLaren. "He was hunched for the spring when—"

"The lion?" interrupted the girl. "Oh, hell!"

Again that inelegant speech fell from her lips with a casual meaningless lightness.

"They don't bother me—the lions," she said. "They're just curious, like the deer. They like to watch me fishing, I think."

"Don't blame 'em!" chuckled McLaren.

"But," and again fear crept into the girl's voice and showed in her eyes, "who are you? Where did you come from? How did you get here? What—what are you doing here?"

"Fishing!" said the other angler.

He saw now that she was a white girl—and very lovely. She was naturally a brunette and her skin was further darkened by much exposure to the sun.

"Fishing," he repeated, a thrill of romance adding itself to mystery and the sense of adventure. "And let me tell you something, sister-angler: You'll never land a trout the size of the one you lost just then until you have at least seventy-five feet of line on a decent reel and rod and use a landing-net."

"Is that so?" said she, her eyes lighting almost belligerently. "Well, let me tell *you* something: You'll never land another trout of any size in this brook, or shoot any more lions in this canyon, if Red Grierson happens to see you first. You're not the only one hereabouts that's mighty quick on the draw!"

CHAPTER VIII

FAIR WARNING

McLAREN made a mental note of "Red" Grierson and, for the time being, turned the conversation back to impersonal matters. He thought it the wiser course; at least, until the first awkwardness of the unexpected meeting could be overcome.

"Honestly," he went on, "you'd get more kick out of the game if you had a better outfit—so you could play a big trout—and used a fly instead of bait."

He noted that the bait-can on the rock beside her was labeled "Salmon Eggs"—which is anathema to all fly-fisherman in the West, as is the term, "worms," in the East.

He found himself wondering how she got the salmon eggs, which come in little cans much in display in "sporting"-goods stores during trout season.

"Flies?" said she, rising to the subject with true angler zeal. "But they won't stick on the hook and get all mussed up when they're wet. Worms are the best, but they're awfully scarce around here, except up by the spring when it's warm weather."

"I meant artificial flies," said McLaren, producing and opening his fly-book for her inspection.

She was utterly delighted at the almost perfect imitations of familiar insects in that book. Her feminine love of color, too, was tickled by the exquisite arrangement of the little feathers about the hook.

"Oh!" she cried. "They're wonderful! I never had any of them to fish with. I'd love to try."

Then McLaren, to disarm any lingering suspicions, make her forget the strangeness of his appearing, began a Waltonian discourse on the art of fishing with the fly—telling her it was an art, not to be learned

in a day, and that it differed from still-fishing with bait in every rule, except that the end was to catch fish, of course.

"But the big trout would smash that thread you've got on your rod!" she protested. "And that bit near the fly-hook"—she referred to the fine gut leader—"looks like a strand of cobweb."

And that was where he explained the action of the reel in giving and taking line as the fish's pulling or yielding required. Also, he initiated her into the use and usefulness of the landing-net in taking the larger trout out of water.

"Let me see you do it!" she challenged.

"All right. Let's try the next pool. Between one thing and another this one's probably dead now."

They went together to the pool above, which she said she had not touched that morning. In two minutes McLaren was fast to a trout. It was not a very large one as south fork trout ran, but its pound-odd weight was quite sufficient for purposes of demonstration.

Her delight at McLaren's skill in controlling, taming and bringing that trout to the net was like that of a child witnessing a circus for the first time.

"Oh, if I could only get an outfit like that!" she cried.

McLaren smiled. She had no idea of the cost of "an outfit" like that particular one of his. But he said, "You'd best start with the simplest, cheapest kind, for you'll probably have a few accidents before you catch on. If it weren't that you mentioned something about a—Mr. Grierson, was it? —who objects to trespassing, it seems, I'd be glad to bring you some of my old stuff next time I come this way."

Instantly a lively alarm again appeared in her quite beautiful face.

"Oh, no—I forgot!" she almost whispered. "You can't come here. You mustn't—for your own sake. You might—I mean—Red Grierson—"

"All right," McLaren interrupted with a laugh of pretended indifference as to whether he came that way again or not. "But do you suppose he'd mind if I skinned that inoffensive lion I shot. After all, it is a mountain-lion, and it's my first."

"Oh, hell!" said she absently. "Skin it if you want to."

He stared at her curiously, the girl for the moment unaware of his studious regard, for she was gazing blankly past him, apparently mulling over some troublesome matter.

They went back to the pool where the lion was lying with its head in the water. While he skinned the carcass with his hunting-knife she sat watching the operation, saying little. McLaren, busy with his task, was also thinking deeply. He had had a chance to hear this girl talk and to study her at closer quarters. He was utterly bewildered.

For this was surely no illiterate girl of the remote places. Despite that inelegant phrase which she seemed to echo more than utter with any sense of its having a meaning, there was about her a certain touch of refinement—perhaps inherited, possibly once inculcated and now half forgotten.

Her skin was dark as an American Indian's. Yet that darkness, in conjunction with her small features, suggested more the East Indian. But her eyes and the changing liveliness of her facial expression were not Asiatic, but Anglo-Saxon-American. He wondered what her connection could be with the recluse who himself might be the "Wild Man of the Mesa." He guessed her age to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty-two.

"How did you get in here?" she asked again after a while.

"Floundered in by accident—looking for good fishing," he replied. "Couldn't get back at first. Afterward—" He hesitated, then decided to be frank. His presence on the mesa was now known anyway. He paused in the skinning operation, looked straight into her eyes and said, "I found a rope bridge up the gorge a bit and crossed by that."

"Oh!" she gasped. "You found that! Then, it's up?"

"Why—yes. Didn't let it down on the wrong side. That might have inconvenienced—Mr. Grierson, say."

"Oh, hell!" she said. This time the phrase had a note of anxiety in it. "Now he'll find it and surely lay for you. I wish you'd go away. And don't ever come back—*please!*"

"Not even with the rod and reel for you?"

"I—I'd love to have them," she said wist-

fully. "I'm just thinking of you. You're nice, and you're neither sick nor drunk."

"Good Lord!" muttered the astounded McLaren. "What am I up against? Listen, little lady," he said aloud, resuming with his knife. "This is nonsense. I'm not prying into anybody's secret affairs. My interest in this place is purely in the trout-fishing."

He had been about to say "was," but thought better of it.

"I'm a doctor when I'm not fishing, and I've got enough to do in my profession without concerning myself about other people's business. Why shouldn't I come back, then? Why should I let anybody—this Mr. Grierson, for instance—interfere with my fishing? It's public domain back here."

"It isn't safe!" she stated dully.

"I know!" he chuckled. "But even that is no argument."

"He'll get you, Grierson will," she reiterated, but she spoke a bit absently, as if her mind were revolving around something McLaren had said.

"You say you are—a doctor?"

"M. D. Want me to examine your tongue?"

"No. It isn't for me. But— Never mind. I only asked. There's no harm in asking."

"Well, now, may I ask you something?" he inquired lightly.

"Hell—yes. I said there was no harm in asking—is there?"

"Not really. Well—how do you come to be in this wild place, little lady?"

"Why, I came in with dad—years ago, I think—dad and Grierson," she said frankly.

"Ah, you live here? You and dad and Grierson?"

"Yes," said she, through lips that suddenly became tightly closed.

McLaren was on the point of asking what business brought "dad and Grierson" to the mesa and kept them there. But he remembered his own assertion that he was not here to pry into anybody's affairs.

"Well," said he, when he had finished the skinning and rolled the pelt into a bundle which he tied with a piece of fishing line, "I was just on my way out when I stumbled over you. And as I've a mess of fish to keep fresh for a trout-supper tonight, I'd best be moving before the sun gets too hot. But listen and get this straight, Miss— What shall I call you, if I may?"

"Diana," said she with wide-eyed gravity. "It's my name, too. What's yours?"

"Ross," said he, taking a leaf from her book.

"Very well, Diana," he went on. "I'm going now. But I'm coming back to fish again tomorrow—no, day after tomorrow. And I'm going to bring you a rod and reel, things like I've got. As for Mr. Grierson —tell him I'm just a harmless fishing lunatic and have designs on nothing hereabout but trout. Red Grierson may be making bootleg, or counterfeit money, or even getting out one of these new minerals. It's nothing to me in any case, so long as he doesn't interfere with my rights as a licensed angler in state waters. Tell him that."

"I don't mean to tell him anything," she said. "It would be the end of you. He wouldn't believe that was all you came for. And if he knows you've found his rope-bridge, he'll just put a bullet through your head and drop you into the gorge."

He laughed.

"How cheerful!" said he. "Still—I'll have to chance that rather than that you should be disappointed about the rod and things."

"I don't want them," she said moodily, making no move when he slung his sack of trout and the lion-skin bundle, picked up his cased rod and prepared to go.

"Well, good-bye for the present—Diana," said he with a twinkle.

"Good-bye, Mister—Ross— Please don't come again," said she, not meeting his eyes.

He left her sitting on the rock by the pool and the skinned carcass of the lion. She did not even look after him as he went. McLaren ascended the comparatively gentle slope of mesa side, as before, then traveling up the gorge's inner edge to the rope-bridge.

It was still up and tied at both ends. He crossed, not without difficulty, carrying his bundles.

Once on the spur side of the gorge he put down his sack to rest himself a bit before beginning the toilsome journey down to Arrowhead. Also, he wished to have a good look at that timbered area on the mesa. It was there undoubtedly that the girl, Diana, and "dad and Grierson" lived.

He had kept as much under cover as pos-

sible on the way up the mesa's edge to the crossing place. Now, on the spur side, he conducted his reconnoitering from a cover of rocks.

He saw nothing indicative of any human habitation there; not a shack, tent or possible cave-dwelling, although anyone of these might be hidden away among the pines and brush.

Not a suggestion of smoke ascended from any part of the mesa, until—

The retina of his eye caught it suddenly. It was some distance up the mesa toward the ragged vertebral range behind.

It came as a sharp puff of dusty vapor filled with flying fragments of rock. Immediately afterward came a dull thud which was quite incommensurate with the apparent violence of the explosion.

That was all. The muffled explosion awoke no echoes and the dusty vapor dispelled or settled swiftly.

McLaren strained his eyes for sight of some human figure up there. But none appeared in the vicinity of the blast, although he watched for five or ten minutes.

Then the retina of his other eye caught a movement in an entirely opposite direction —that by which he had come up the ravine's edge to the rope-bridge. It was the girl, Diana. She came swiftly, stealthily, through the rocks, her lissome movements reminding McLaren of that lion which had watched his crossing of the gorge on the former trip.

Unaware that he was watching her, that he was not by now a considerable way down the spur, she came rapidly to the mesa's edge and the rope-bridge.

After a covert glance around her and in the direction of the point whence the blast had come, she untied the ropes from the sunken posts on her side and threw the released end of the rope-bridge into the chasm.

As soon as she had buried the pulling-cord, leaving it as McLaren had first discovered it, with another glance about her she started walking quite casually toward the timbered area.

Into this she disappeared about ten minutes later, McLaren watching until she was out of sight.

"Now, I wonder why she did that?" he muttered. "Was it to prevent Grierson's discovering that I'd ever been on the Mesa of Lions?

"Or was it to prevent my ever coming back?"

CHAPTER IX

A PROFESSIONAL CALL

McLAREN had still ten days of his vacation remaining. Because of Red Grierson, lions, or anything else, he did not propose to abandon the excellent fishing he had found. Besides, there was that girl. She interested him, roused his curiosity, at least.

After one day's intermission for rest he again entered the mesa by way of his private route—"Slide Rock," as he called it. On this trip he carried, besides his own fishing outfit, a spare rod, reel and landing-net, together with some extra flies, leaders and line.

As on the two previous visits he first reconnoitered the situation at the gorge's short-cut crossing. He expected to find the rope-bridge down on the spur side, as the girl had left it. He chuckled to think how he had outwitted her in the matter of getting back on the mesa.

To his surprise he discovered that the rope-bridge was now down on the mesa side! Someone must have hauled it up from its depending position on the spur side, made it fast on the mesa side, crossed and released it from the other end. That someone was not on the mesa now, had not returned to it. Until that someone returned and made the bridge fast on the spur side it was out of the question for anyone to raise it from the mesa side on which it was hanging and *make it fast on the farther side.*

In short, nobody else could leave the mesa until that traveler abroad saw fit to return! "And inasmuch as I can't get back up Slide Rock," reflected Ross McLaren, "it looks like I'm on the mesa to stay for an indefinite period—unless, of course, I try to get around that cross-section of hell up there."

But he was a thorough believer in his luck, besides being a philosopher as most brook-anglers are. He did not propose to worry about the matter until he had to.

At first he was of a mind to go boldly into the timbered area where the human

inhabitants of the mesa undoubtedly had their camp. And he was certain that it was Grierson who was temporarily *not* on the mesa. But on second thought, or acting upon an instinctive reasoning, he decided first to visit the Lion's Pool in the north fork.

The girl might be there, expecting him. He had told her he would come back the day after tomorrow. That was today. Even if she had let down that bridge to the spur side to prevent his return by that route, she must be aware that he had some other way of getting in. He had plainly stated to her that he floundered in by accident, that he could not get back at first—and then discovered the rope-bridge. Perhaps, however, in her preoccupation she had not noted, or possibly not digested, the statement.

But she had! He realized that when he came to the Lion's Pool.

Even as his instinctive following of the girl's psychologic reasoning had been correct —that she would go to the Lion's Pool on the second day, in case he might be there— her following of his male psychology had been equally accurate. If he came, he would first go to the Lion's Pool to look for her!

She was not there herself. But close to the carcass of the lion—which in the meantime had been partly devoured by other cougars—he found an upright willow-wand on the top of which was a paper pierced through twice on the stick.

On the paper was written in a girlish but not uneducated hand:

Ross:

R. G. went to Pueblo and Los Angeles same night after you were here. Will not likely return for two or three days. Come to woody spot on mesa. Strike the spring and follow trail. When you see big cave-mouth, stop and whistle like a blue-jay.

Diana.

McLaren's spirits leaped to further adventure and the lure of a mystery's possible solution. Also, he was elated over two things. The girl wanted him, needed him —quite urgently, too, if she had gone to all this trouble, risked leaving this note for Grierson to stumble on, and was herself for some reason unable to be at the pool.

And, in passing, this note proved that she had expected him. Therefore, her action in letting the rope-bridge down after him was merely to prevent Grierson's becoming aware that a stranger had been on the mesa.

The other thing that elated him was Grierson's absence. McLaren was not afraid of the man. He knew that sooner or later he must come face to face with him. But for the time being the man was an obstacle to thorough understanding of the situation. Now he was absent. McLaren could enter the timber grove and learn a few things.

He had no reason to suspect a trap in this message. He felt sure that, much as Diana might fear Red Grierson, she would never act as his decoy. So he went directly to the timbered area without bothering about cover or caution.

He found the spring without difficulty. It was situated about fifty yards within the south edge of the growth and advertised itself by the lush green about it. At the spring —a small but apparently steady upflowing —he found a well-beaten trail leading through undergrowth of wild raspberry bushes which were just putting on their springtime greenery of leaves.

The trail led back, sloping gradually upward, to where the timber and brush thinned out and the great boulder-slides of the vertebral range began to pile up to the pinnacled heights. At the base of this sudden rock ascent appeared the mouth of a large cave—or, rather, a vast recess under an overhanging rock lip. A wisp of smoke hung about this opening.

McLaren, his heart beating fast in expectation, halted and uttered a fair imitation of the blue-jay's call. He had no need to repeat it. The somewhat raucous jeer was still on his lips when the girl appeared in the opening and came running down the trail to meet him. It was as if her ears had been awaiting no sound on earth but that call.

He had the spare rod with him and the outfit to go with it, but he forgot to present her with it; instantly forgot all about that which he had thought might be a fair excuse for his presence if any other than Diana were there to question it.

The girl looked tired; as if she had not slept, or had been under a prolonged strain. Only her eyes were for the moment not lusterless when she saw McLaren.

"Oh, I'm so relieved to see you! Glad that you're here!" said she. "I thought you might

have taken me at my word and not come back."

"I went to the Lion's Pool," he said simply.

"I couldn't wait at the pool myself," she went on quickly. "I slipped away as soon as I could leave dad—after Grierson went. I wanted to make sure you would know I needed you—your help—whenever you came."

"What's the trouble, Miss Diana?"

"It's dad, and you said you were a doctor. After Grierson went he had a spell. He has them every so often, oftener now than he used to. He's wanted to have a doctor for ever so long, but Grierson wouldn't hear of it—a stranger, you know, here."

"Amiable beast!" growled McLaren.

"And Dad was too weak to make the trip to Los Angeles, or even Pueblo. And now—"

"And now," interrupted the doctor with a professional note, "let us have a look at your sick dad."

The girl led the way up the remaining bit of trail and into the rock recess. The latter, which was a deep concave beneath the rock lip in front, became a real cave farther in, with several small tunnels branching off.

The residents of this place seemed to use the main recess under the ledge as a half-outdoor living room. This contained a rude fireplace built of mud and stones; also all the paraphernalia of camping.

The entrances of two of the smaller recesses, which might be inbranching tunnels, were covered by half-cured lion skins. These recesses did not interest McLaren for the moment, save as he noted them and surmised they were used as sleeping quarters.

What took his professional eye at once was a bed on the bare ground at the rear of the main "room." It was apparently made of dried grass and leaves and covered with animal skins. On it lay a man. He was naked except for a loin-cloth of soft fawn skin. His body was much emaciated. In the flushed cheeks and bright eyes of a face which had yet the stamp of good birth and high intelligence, Dr. Ross McLaren read the whole story—pathologically.

He knew this man's days were numbered; that no science in the world could now do more than alleviate such further sufferings as might be his.

Nevertheless, he approached the pallet with a cheery optimism of manner and said "T. B., eh? Oh, well—one in every seven has it at some time or other; often without knowing it; more often getting better without being aware of ever having had it. Let's see what we can do for you."

The sick man had glanced almost with triumph at his daughter. He now smiled his gratitude to the doctor, who had grasped the slim, hot hand lifted to him.

"Fine!" he chuckled weakly. "We've slipped one over on that brute!"

"What shall I call my new patient?" asked McLaren.

"Hampton—Culver Hampton," was the reply.

"All right, Mr. Hampton. I'm Dr. McLaren, of San Diego. I haven't the things with me that you ought to have, but I can bring them in a day or two—tomorrow, if necessary."

A little moan of disappointment escaped the girl, whose full name was presumably Diana Hampton.

"Oh, but *he* may be back tomorrow!"

"What of it?" asked McLaren belligerently. "Mr. Hampton needs a doctor, wants a doctor, and he's got a doctor. And that same doctor is going to stick!"

The sick man nodded his head eagerly. Clearly he had spirit, even if the flesh were weak. He studied McLaren's face intently, then gestured to his daughter and whispered, "He's a man, Di—a real man! You can trust him. Tell him everything!"

"She can tell me later—after I get through with you, Mr. Hampton," said the doctor. "She and I will have a little talk outside. You mustn't do, say, or hear anything to excite you. You can't stand it, just yet."

He remained with the sick man ten or fifteen minutes, gathering pathological data from his general condition. Then he bade him a cheery *adios,* promising to be back within two days with some medicines to keep down temperature and alleviate the coughing-spells which disturb the patient's needed rest.

McLaren, who had sent the girl out while examining her father, joined her outside. They walked together in silence toward the spring. There they halted by mutual consent. McLaren put his two hands on the girl's

shoulders and told her the truth about her dad.

For a few minutes she was shaken with sobs. McLaren's arm slipped about her shoulders. His sympathy and strength quieted her.

"But what's to happen—when he's gone?" she asked when she could speak clearly. "Then—Grierson will get me."

" 'Getting' people seems to be this Grierson person's long suit," said McLaren. "I'd like to cure him of that, as a habit."

Diana Hampton shook her head despairingly.

"You don't know Red," she said. "You never saw him. It's only his respect for dad—because dad's different, you know—that has held him off so long.

"He wants me, and he makes no secret of it. Dad wouldn't hear of it. If dad had been well, I think Grierson would just have deliberately picked a quarrel and killed him as the easiest way of settling it. Now, while he won't fight a sick man, he just taunts dad and says, 'Oh, hell! You won't last long, old-timer, and then it'll be me looks after Di!' "

"You'll probably need looking after, little lady," said McLaren gravely. "But I don't think it's Red Grierson will get the job," he added with a sudden tightening of his jaw-muscles. "Now tell me!" he went on. "What's it all about? Mind—I'm not prying. But I want to help you and make your father—comfortable, at least. And he advised you to tell me everything."

"I know," said she. "And I'm going to—right now. It all started about three years ago—" she began.

But that was as far as her story got on this occasion.

From among the trees bordering the trail between the mesa and the spring came a hoarse voice, for all the world like the roar of some infuriated bull.

"Hands up—*you!*"

McLaren and the girl spun around. The doctor, at least, was momentarily staggered by the apparition which emerged from the trees.

It was a man, a giant of a man, with flaming red hair and a heavy, brutal face which showed evidences of a rare but recent shave—and much liquor. He was dressed in an ill-fitting khaki suit, obviously new, but stained with the perspiration of recent hard travel. He wore laced knee-boots.

In his hands he held a repeating-rifle, the muzzle of which was decorated with a thing forbidden by law—a silencer!

"Put 'em up—*you!*" bellowed this person, who was all of six feet three in height and had a prodigious shoulder-breadth.

"Don't shoot, Red! Please don't shoot!" pleaded the girl.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said McLaren to the man, without even raising his hands as commanded.

"You see," he added calmly, "the Arrowhead bunch know I'm up here and might come looking for me."

CHAPTER X

THE DOCTOR LEAVES HIS GUN

THE effect of McLaren's significant speech was instantaneous and complete. Red Grierson slowly lowered the rifle and stared at the daring intruder with the facial expression of a slow thinker, baffled. Plainly the hint about what might happen to the privacy of the mesa should McLaren be too long overdue at Arrowhead Ranch completely staggered the red-headed giant.

"Yuh're bluffin'!" he snarled. "But let's hear some more. I aim to kill yuh, but I ain't in no hurry. Maybe yuh'd like to bid fer time, tellin' me how in thunder yuh gets up here, an' what in hell yuh're doing here."

"I don't propose to bid for any time. I've lots to spare this morning!" retorted McLaren. "And you're not going to do any killing, Friend Grierson, not this morning—not even a little shooting. As I say, the Arrowhead bunch know I'm up here. If you aren't quite prepared to entertain a crowd of wild and curious buckaroos, I'd advise you to take your finger off that trigger. Then maybe I'll explain my side of things."

Grierson studied McLaren's face, his bloodshot eyes taking in every detail of him, down to the holstered automatic and the fishing outfit. He also shot a glance of suspicion at Diana Hampton, who was standing by, trembling with suspense.

"How about him, gal?" he shot at her.

"It's all right, Red. He doesn't know anything. Just fishing—and he's a doctor—and I—"

"Let me do the talking, Diana—Miss Hampton," interrupted McLaren. "You've got enough to worry you."

To Grierson, who was apparently satisfied that matters—and his killing shot—could hang fire for a bit, McLaren continued.

"What Miss Hampton suggests is true. No outsider but myself knows anybody's living on this mesa, although," he put in as a subtle touch, "there's one man has suspected it for some time and might get quickly suspicious again. He saw your smoke.

"I came up here only to fish trout. How I got up in the first place I'm keeping to myself for the time being. As you're so jealous of this mesa's privacy, I'll keep that little secret of mine to play against that gun of yours. Maybe it's the same way the buckaroos would start that sudden invasion if I should be missing too long."

At this speech the expression which came over Grierson's stupid face was such that the doctor began to feel a genuinely humorous enjoyment of the situation.

"There ain't but one way!" the red giant stated doggedly. "An' a tenderfoot couldn't make it, 'nless, maybe—"

"Unless, maybe, I found the rope-bridge," supplied the doctor with a chuckle. "I did, although it was down on the wrong side for coming in. But I was on the mesa when I first found your ladder and I hooked it up for crossing with my fly—hook and line, you know."

Grierson stared, with a kind of growing fear, or respect. It was perhaps the same feeling he used to have about Culver Hampton—the inferior man's awe of the superior. He more than half believed that this cool young stranger was telling more than half the truth.

"I came for fishing only," McLaren repeated. "I'm interested in neither of you, Friend Grierson, nor what your business may be on this mesa. You can have all of it all the time for all of me—except where trout-fishing is concerned.

"I happened to meet this girl—Miss Hampton. Learned that her father was ill. Being a doctor by profession, I came along to the cave here to see what I could do."

"So 'twas you spilt the beans!" rasped Grierson, with an ugly look at Diana.

"She was only doing what was right," put in McLaren before the girl herself could justify her action. "And she did right, too. I'll not hide from you, Grierson, any more than I did from her, that Culver Hampton can't last long."

"The hell yuh say!" said Grierson with a note of— Was it interest or plain satisfaction?

Certainly he pondered this announcement with not a symptom of regret. As a matter of fact, he had no objection to Hampton's dying a natural death. The sooner the better for his plans.

For the moment he was clearly relieved to perceive as a probable fact that this intruder was not interested in anything on the mesa but trout-fishing and doctoring the sick man; also, to realize that by humoring McLaren he might be able to keep others off. Immediately he became less antagonistic—in demeanor, at least.

"Then if I let yuh go this time, mister, yuh ain't comin' back in here?"

"I certainly am—just as often as I think my visits necessary to the patient's comfort," was the reply.

Grierson's face again took on that baffled look. He was in a quandary. He did not dare shoot this man. Those buckaroos—

On the other hand, if he let him go—to come and go as he willed—would he talk, revealing to others the presence of human inhabitants on the mesa, rousing curiosity and inviting investigation?

Of course, that might be a lie about another secret entrance to the mesa. But if there should be such an entrance? And this intruder had hinted that that would be the way others would come if he failed to return.

"Then," said Grierson at length, his face puckered hideously in the effort of logical reasoning, "then if I say yuh can come here to look over my pardner, yuh agree to keep yer trap shut about folks livin' here an'—an' anythin' yuh see doin' aroun' this here mesa?"

"I agree to be bound to nothing," replied McLaren. "But to that I'll say 'yes' of my own free will—so long as I see nothing doing around here that's crooked or hurtful to my patient—or Miss Hampton."

"Oh!" sneered Grierson. "So you aim to keer for the gal, likewise?"

"Look here, my friend!" snapped the doctor, losing patience. "Let me tell you some-

thing. When I was a hospital interne back in Chicago and took my turn at ambulance duty about the city, I've had to walk over the corpses of several policemen to get the maniac who'd shot 'em down and was holding the rest of the police at bay. Nothing happened! He gave me his gun like a nice little man and fell weeping in my arms. It's maybe hard to explain, but even maniacs and criminals seem to know, sort of instinctively, that it's bad luck or bad policy to shoot a doctor who comes simply to allay suffering.

"All of which means, Grierson, that *you can't scare me,* and that if you want to keep on doing your business here—whatever it is—you'd better not interfere with my comings and goings. I mean to doctor Mr. Hampton whether you like it or not. Also, while I'm over this way I plan to do some fishing. And while I'm being frank about a few things, Grierson, let me add that, if you interfere or do anything to disturb my patient, I may decide to have Mr. Hampton removed to where he can be better taken care of.

"You wouldn't like that, I fancy—as Miss Hampton would, of course, go out with him. But I don't see that there's likely to be any call—it won't help him any—to move him out, unless you and Miss Hampton here aren't able to keep him comfortable under my directions.

"So it's entirely up to you—mainly you, Grierson—whether your being on this mesa remains a secret or not."

The red-haired giant said nothing. He was glowering at Diana Hampton. She, in turn, was looking at her father's, and her own, champion with eyes in which there was nothing but glowing admiration for his cool nerve.

"In the meantime," concluded McLaren, "I'm going back to Arrowhead. And to save time I'll use your short-cut bridge.

"I'll say nothing to the outfit down there—for the present, at least—and I'll be back day after tomorrow with medicines for the patient. Good morning, Grierson," he added, turning his back and walking down the trail toward the mesa where the latter met the timber's edge.

The red giant was left standing in a stupefied sort of way, his eyes upon the girl, whose gaze, in turn, was following the receding figure of the doctor. But when McLaren had gone about a dozen steps—and only he knew how it felt, that anticipation of a shot in the back—he turned and beckoned Diana. She instantly flew to him, Grierson's eyes followed her lithe movements with jealous suspicion.

"Diana—Miss Hampton," said McLaren, talking quietly, but with a casual air for the red giant's benefit, "I'm going back to the Lion's Pool before going out by the bridge. I suppose the ladder's down on the far side, but I can haul it up by the usual string. You, or Grierson, can let it down after I've crossed. But when you get a chance, slip down to the pool. I'll leave your fishing outfit there, openly, as your excuse if he should follow and spy. I'll also leave that willow-wand you stuck the message on—leave it lying on the rocks. The thin end will be pointing somewhere. Follow its pointer if Grierson isn't watching and you'll find my automatic pistol hidden among the rocks. It's fully loaded, Miss Hampton, with a cartridge in the barrel. All you have to do to fire it is push the little button marked 'safe'—I daren't give you the weapon now or show you how to use it—and pull the trigger. Watch you don't shoot yourself. But if that red brute goes too far, just shoot him and leave me to explain why you did it.

"That's all, except—if you can meet me I'll be at the Lion's Pool shortly after dawn the day after tomorrow. Then I'll instruct you further in the use of that automatic and"—with a smile—"the art of fly-fishing. Maybe, then, too, you'll have time to tell me that story—yours and your dad's. Until then, keep your nerve, little lady. You've seen for yourself. At bottom, Red Grierson is a coward—dangerous, of course, but a coward, none the less.

"Until the morning after next, then, take care of your dad—and yourself, Diana Hampton."

CHAPTER XI

PURCHASES AND PRECAUTIONS

DR. ROSS McLAREN drove on the following day with Pity-All Plutarch to the nearest town, Pueblo. The foreman was making his regular tri-weekly trip on general ranch business and to get the mail. McLaren wanted certain counteracting and

soothing drugs for his patient on the mesa. The journey to Pueblo, accomplished in a flivver glorying in the name of the Desert Cabbage, was marked by little talk between the two men. McLaren had a good deal to think about. Plutarch, sensing this, kept his mouth shut at first.

Later, however, he arose to a profound reflection that Romance went out of the ranges with the introduction of the flivver, even as steam killed it upon that sea around which his landsman fancy occasionally played.

But two miles farther on he remarked suddenly, "Darned if it did, at that! A little while back I reads in the papers about a South American dic-tator which swipes a tramp steamboat and gets away with about a million pesos he's swiped previous from the state treasury. He runs the steamboat on a reef somewheres in the South Seas an' later turns up, fair eruptin' with cash, in this here place called Ta-hyti. Pity all pore sailors at sea with a guy like that! An' as for flivvers—with my own eyes I sees the darndest runnin' fight from cyars right along about this here part of the Pueblo road.

"It's about six months ago. Seems like three hombres sticks up a bank in Los Angeles an' is beatin' it south for the Mex border. One of them has to stop an' say a tender *adiós* to his gal up Santa Ana way—on route, so to speak. That leaves a clue. Sheriff an' posse comes after them in a high-power gas-buggy an' overhauls sight of them this side of Pueblo. Then the shootin' begins on both sides, both cars goin' lickety-split! The bandits abandons the flivver finally an', carryin' the money bags, tries to make the rocky range over to the right there. But the sheriff an' good shootin' heads 'em off. The bank gets its money back an' the state is saved a trial an' other expenses, said bandits bein' too perforated when picked up to care much 'bout anything but harps."

"Interesting," said McLaren, visualizing the scene as it must have been. "If they'd made the Mesa of Lions, now, they might have got away with it."

"Sure, if they hadn't been seen headin' that way, an' if they knowed a way on to it."

For a few minutes McLaren turned his mind to the possibility that Red Grierson and Culver Hampton were fugitives from justice. But he dismissed the idea of their having been connected with that particular bank robbery. They had been on the mesa two years, at least, and Hampton could not have been in any shape to leave it in the past year. Plutarch had witnessed the running fight just six months before. Then, too, fugitives from justice would hardly be likely to take a girl on to the mesa with them, at least a girl like Diana Hampton; unless, of course, it was that her unsullied innocence and frankness of mind and speech constituted her a menace if left behind.

In the end McLaren decided that the bank-bandit fight in this vicinity was simply a coincidence. Perhaps Plutarch had told the story as a lead to McLaren's confidence concerning the mystery of the mesa; if, as might be, the doctor felt like talking and needed some little encouragement to start. But McLaren said nothing to enlighten or elucidate.

They arrived in Pueblo, a scattering of houses, stores and cattlepens around a galvanized-iron roofed depot of the Oro Co. & San Diego Railroad. While Pity-All got the mail and transacted odd commissions for the ranch—and Ma Brewster—McLaren wrote prescriptions and had them filled at the only drug store.

Thereafter he hunted about the little town for a store where he might be able to buy a .25 automatic pistol. The general store did not have anything in that vest-pocket size, said there was no call for pea-shooters in that part of Oro County.

IT WAS in a gasoline service station that McLaren found what he wanted. The gasoline man had only one—second-hand at that, although in good shape. He was glad to get rid of it and an opened box of cartridges which went with it.

"I took it from a broke tourist who needed some repairs," he explained. "You'd be surprised at the things I get in trade—mainly for gas. You can't see a feller stuck when he wants to get on his way. I got the finest collection of junk you ever saw. You don't want to buy a nice washin' board, do you? I got that from an incomin' Iowa family. They offered me the family parrot, cage an' all, but it was a

worse talker than the Iowa mamma herself!"

"No," said McLaren, "although a bachelor, I'm still giving my washing out. But if you happen to have a second-hand hurricane lantern."

"Sure, I got one—if you don't mind it's bein' with a red funnel. It was once the tail-light of a caravan from Indiana."

"A red lantern suits me even better," said McLaren, while he felt amusement over the tragi-comedies behind the articles he was buying.

Having relieved the gasoline station man of the .25 and the red lamp, he rejoined Pity-All, who was ready to start back.

The foreman's eye, glancing over McLaren's purchases, looked with some wonder at the red lantern and stared doubtfully at the vest-pocket pistol. But he said nothing direct concerning either.

That .25 in particular caused Pity-All a good deal of puzzled thought, nevertheless. For it had not escaped his observing eye that on the previous afternoon McLaren had returned to the ranch minus the service automatic which had recently been as much part of him as his clothes. Only when they were within sight of the ranch buildings did the foreman relieve himself of an unobtruding speech which might be considered as his mental summing-up of the possible situation on the mesa.

"If yuh ever needs help, doc," said he, "call on your Uncle Plutarch. An' the whole bunch is back of me if yuh needs 'em likewise."

"Thanks, Plute," said McLaren quietly. "I appreciate that and won't forget it. I may need your help at that."

They were almost at the ranchhouse when the doctor decided to add something.

"Plute," said he, "there are some things I can't explain, or talk about, just yet. But if you could spare me an hour of your time this evening—say, after supper, there's a fair moon—I'd like to show you something you'd have to know about if I should need that help you offered."

"Sure, if we can get back in time for the game. My other eye-tooth's fair achin' either to be put out of its misery or get revenge for its mate."

So right after supper that night Pity-All Plutarch and Ross McLaren escaped unobserved from the ranch, the foreman curious but quite unsuspecting the purpose of this moonlight *pasear*. Near the willow-forest under the prow-like apex of the Mesa of the Lions McLaren halted his comrade and pointed up to the "arrowhead."

"Plute," said he, "if some evening I don't get back and you see a red speck of light on that high point, you'll know I'm somewhere up there and needing you."

"Was that the idea of the red lantern?"

"Exactly. Now come on and I'll show you how to get up on the mesa in emergency. The call would be in the night, of course, if the lantern were used, so you'd better get acquainted with the trail in."

He led the way up the south fork to Slide Rock. Ordinarily, despite the bright moonlight, the going among the boulders would have been highly dangerous to Plutarch's horseman legs, but by now the simplest route was familiar to McLaren, and Pity-All made strict note of various avoidances and short cuts.

Standing on top of Slide Rock, McLaren pointed to the crossing rock-slab below. "There's the way," said he. "Once on the other side it's easy to reach the top. The trouble, if it comes, will be over in the bit of timber where you once saw smoke. It's about the center of the mesa but a bit up toward the back range.

"If you get the call, bring a rope and make it fast here, so you can pull yourself up again. Otherwise you may find yourself in a land-trap. That's all, Plutarch. I'd like to explain more, but for the present—"

"Do the explainin' when yuh're good an' ready, pardner," Plutarch was about to say, when all at once his hand flew to the six-gun on his thigh.

Quick as thought McLaren grabbed his arm. "Don't shoot!" he whispered.

"Hell!" protested Pity-All. "It's one of them pestiferous cats! Don't yuh see it? Over there in the shadda of the rock. Don't yuh see them two yaller eyes ketchin' the moonlight?"

"Yes, I see the brute," said McLaren. "But that's an old friend of mine, Plute. Lives in a cave back of a ledge just above here. But let it go. The roar of that

gat of yours might spill a whole mountain of beans. We're too close to—the trouble."

Grumblingly Pity-All sheathed his gun. It went against his grain to pass up a shot at either a rattler or a cougar. But he realized that he was here to help McLaren, whom he had grown to respect for his poker abilities if not for his closeness of mouth.

"All right, hombre," he muttered. "You're runnin' the bank. But when you gets through, an' gives me the word, maybe I can use this way to get up on that infernal mesa. When that time comes me an' the bunch is gonna take a day off an' do some tall lion-skinnin' up there.

"And," he added with a grin that was quite visible in the moonlight, "when you gives the lady that pea-shooter an' gits back yer own gun, pray present to her the compliments an' salootations of Mr. Plutarch Cummins.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked before McLaren recovered from surprise at the other's accurate deductions.

"Back to the ranch—and deuces wild!" laughed the doctor.

"Come on!" said Plutarch eagerly.

That night Pity-All went to bed in the highest state of mental satisfaction. Out of deuces wild he had made the finest assortment of hands that ever swept the rest of a poker-party to destruction!

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE TALE, INDEED!

McLAREN was at the Lion's Pool shortly after dawn next morning. He found Diana Hampton there, awaiting him. He had brought the lantern with him and the .25 automatic. At the former she stared with considerable surprise until he told her his idea.

"If Grierson breaks loose, or your dad gets worse while I'm off the mesa, try and set it, lighted, at the point of the mesa top where I or a friend of mine down at the ranch, can see it. Don't worry. I'll come at any hour of the day or night—with a little army behind me if necessary. And we won't need any rope-bridge to come in by, either! We'll hide the lantern, Diana, wherever you think it will be handiest for you, should you want it in a hurry.

"As for the gun, mine is too heavy for your little hand. You can conceal this better. Maybe you have a pocket. If not, strap the holster about your waist under your Diana-like costume. The lantern, of course, is for a night signal. If you have trouble in the daytime, come to the apex and shoot off the whole magazine as fast as you can. That's if you need me for your dad. If it's Grierson—shoot off the whole works at him!"

Then, when he had inquired about her father—who was neither better nor worse—given her more minute instructions about the operation of an automatic pistol and they had agreed upon a place to hide the lantern, he asked her to resume that interrupted story.

"Oh, hell!" she said. "You don't want to be bothered with that. You're being kind enough, troubling yourself for dad and me, and—"

"I like to be bothered for you, little lady," the doctor quietly interrupted. "And," he added gravely, "would you mind not saying, 'Oh, hell!'? It somehow doesn't belong to you."

"That's what dad always says," she remarked with a kind of wonder. "But—I was sort of brought up on it—Grierson, you know. Is it so very awful?.

"It's silly, and meaningless when you say it."

"What'll I say, then?" she asked with a mocking twinkle in her dark eyes. "Perhaps, 'Oh, my!' wouldn't sound quite so silly or meaningless."

McLaren burst out laughing. "Say anything you like, Diana. I'm sorry I spoke."

"Well, anyway," she said after a reflective pause, "I'll try not to say 'Oh, hell!'—just because you want me not to. I'd do anything for you, Ross."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed McLaren within himself. "She's unique!"

"All right," he added aloud. "Let's hear the story."

She told it simply, rapidly, directly. But there was enough of it not germane to the situation to warrant an even more abridged version.

Diana's father was of an old Connecticut family. Her mother died shortly after

her birth. The girl had no memory of even one whom she might have regarded as a sort of mother, having been brought up by a distant cousin of elderly spinster attributes and later being sent to a private school for daughters of well-to-do parents. When she was seventeen her father, who had been in some financial business in the city of New York, fell seriously ill of that pulmonary trouble which had handicapped him more or less all his life. He was ordered to go either south or southwest. He chose Southern California and in due time arrived with his daughter in Los Angeles.

He did not lack for funds. But his health did not improve, either because his disease was too far advanced or the climate was not suited to his particular case. After about a year in and about the coast city he became interested in a "cure" theory —one of the sort that springs up intermittently. It was a nature cure, mainly calling for the discarding of all clothing and the exposure of the body to sunlight and fresh air. Without entering upon the merits or demerits of the cure, the trouble in Hampton's case was a place to practise it!

It was about this time that his capital got down to a few thousand dollars. It was about the same time that Culver Hampton, sitting on a bench in one of the city parks, taking as much sun-cure as the laws of Los Angeles would allow, made acquaintance with Mr. Grierson.

This Grierson—as he proclaimed his name when he sat down on the bench Hampton was occupying and took advantage of park-bench license to enter into conversation—was at first interesting. He was a prospector, just in from the wilds, and he had brought proofs of a strike. Grierson's trouble at this time was that he had no money to purchase the tools and supplies necessary for a more thorough proving of his find's full value.

"It was a mine," said Diana, "and he showed dad lumps of stone with the metal veins running all through them."

"Confidence game? Swindle?" said McLaren.

"Oh h—" Diana started to say. Then, "Oh, no! We have a mine—a real mine. Dad and Grierson are going to be rich. They're rich now, I think. Dad's been wanting to sell out the secret, but Grierson won't hear of it yet."

At that first meeting, she continued, her father—returning bench-confidence for bench-confidence—told Grierson about his own troubles and how much interested he was in this nature cure.

To describe this part of the negotiations briefly, Grierson told Hampton that his mine was on a mesa where human beings never set foot and that, aside from its being highly suited to the "Adam cure"—as he termed it—the air was so brisk and dry that a man couldn't be ailing long, even with all his clothes on!

This first talk was followed by others. During these days of conferring on the park bench, Hampton appeared to have staked Grierson to his meals and lodging-rent. In the end they formed a fifty-fifty partnership. Hampton was to put up the money for the initial development on the Mesa of Lions. Grierson was to do the manual labor. Hampton and his daughter were to go back with the prospector to the mesa and there begin the nature cure.

So Hampton and Diana came to the Mesa of Lions, traveling to Pueblo by rail. There they were met by Grierson, thereafter making the journey up the accessible spur by moonlight and reaching the mesa by the rope-bridge which the prospector had constructed in the meantime. The entry by moonlight, and by a secret bridge let down the moment they were on the mesa, were matters in keeping with the general secrecy and caution Grierson had kept up ever since.

For some time things went well. Grierson worked steadily on the mine, while Hampton took the cure, attired only in a loin-clout of soft-cured fawn skin, and for a time he improved in health. The free, unhampered life of the mesa added to Diana's physical perfection, and at length Grierson began to take notice of her loveliness. But daily contact with him did nothing to improve her mind. The latter, however, had passed the highly impressionable age. During that period she had been schooled in refinement. Now only as much of culture as was surface polish got rubbed off. Her tongue, however, caught a few twists not permissible in a private school for the daughter of well-to-do parents!

This was about all Diana had to tell McLaren of past history.

For the rest, Grierson began to make trips to the city, taking small quantities of metal, which he converted into cash, and returning to the mesa again usually more or less drunk. But no matter how drunk he was, he was ever careful to throw possible followers off the track. That he had trailers is probable, for the stuff he took to the city for assay and sale was of a nature to arouse cupidity.

It was not only gold, but platinum—also pitchblende mixed with gold.

Ever on his excursions he utilized the rope-bridge, which he let down going and coming, and carried the rifle with the silencer attachment. This weapon he probably cached when nearing Pueblo and unearthed on the way back. He was never without it when not actually in town or city.

His drinking became heavier as his trips abroad grew more frequent and his cash returns larger. Sometimes he brought liquor back with him and stayed drunk until it was finished. It was during those periods that he became a menace to Diana, who was housekeeper for the men, and a source of anxiety to the invalid Hampton.

The general difficulty of the situation came to a head when Grierson proposed to Hampton for his daughter as a wife. Culver Hampton, shocked at the mere idea, treated the red-haired ruffian to a first sample of the superior man's aloofness from the inferior. Which did not improve Grierson's temper, or refine his attitude toward father and daughter. Then, between anxiety and his ailment's natural course, Culver Hampton began to lose ground. Thereupon Grierson refused to have a doctor—a stranger—on the mesa. He also kept father and daughter virtually prisoners by manipulation of the rope-bridge, counting on Hampton's physical inability to travel up, around and down from the terrific ridge behind. Grierson probably felt that now he could afford to await the father's natural death before taking possession of his partner's share in the mine and also his partner's daughter.

This was the situation when Ross McLaren stumbled by accident upon the Mesa of Lions, except that, after two years, Culver Hampton was nearing the end of his life's tether.

McLaren heard Diana's story with a growing sympathy and a half-understanding of some things this girl herself might not suspect.

He would have liked to know, to be sure, of a possible chapter which preceded Hampton's meeting with Grierson; a chapter dealing with the red giant's earliest entry upon the Mesa of Lions and his discovery of platinum. McLaren had reason to suspect that there had been another man concerned in that discovery.

"Outside of drinking, and annoying you, and his natural desire for secrecy about the mesa," he said to Diana, "have you ever noticed anything peculiar about Grierson's conduct?"

"No," she replied, "except—sometimes I think he's not quite right in his head."

"How does it show? I mean, tell me of one particular instance."

"He's got a queer hobby."

"Oh, everyone has a hobby," laughed the fly-fishing enthusiast, "and usually it appears queer to others who have a different kind. What's his hobby?"

"Collecting bones," said Diana.

"Bones?"

"I can't for the life of me see what fun he gets out of it," she said. "He really doesn't get any. He's terribly serious about it. When he gets a new specimen he's upset for days over it. And once he flared up at me for nothing, just when I thought to please him."

"What happened?"

"I found a bone one day—a curious-looking thing like a bear's paw, long and with toes. I brought it to him because it was dried up and sort of holding together in one piece. He nearly went crazy when he saw it. Snatched it from me and told me to leave such things alone in future. Asked me what kind of girl I was to be bringing home a thing like that. But I noticed he didn't throw it away himself. He kept it and, I suppose, buried it with the rest."

"The rest?"

"Oh, hell—I mean *yes*. He buried them just like a dog does. Every so often he finds a new specimen. One day, when he didn't know I was up on the high ground looking down on him, I saw him bury something white—another bone, I suppose—a little way back of the camp.

"After he'd gone I went and looked. I supposed it must be the place where he kept his collection. But I couldn't lift the heavy slab of scaled-off rock he'd laid over a pile of smaller stones."

McLaren was staring at the ground without seeing it. He was thinking hard, adding together a possible two and probable two and making a likely four of the sum. Particularly his mind was dwelling on that human femoral bone he had found on the mesa over toward the south fork.

"First chance we get, Diana," said he in an odd tone, "I wish you'd show me where Grierson keeps his collection. Being a doctor —a student of physical anatomy, you know —I'm rather interested in bones myself. In the meantime, before we go to see your dad, how about that little lesson on fly-casting?"

"Oh!" she cried, springing to her feet with animation. "I hardly need any lessons. I watched you that day and, after finding the rod and things, I practiced all yesterday.

"And what's more, Ross, I caught a trout —on the fly—and landed it—with a net!"

CHAPTER XIII

TRYING IT ON THE DOG!

GRIERSON had gone to work at the mine that morning. It may have been industry on his part or merely that he wished to avoid that visiting doctor, fearing to match wits with him and again find himself baffled, defeated and helpless to retaliate. He kept away from the cave during the greater part of the day, so that McLaren's visit with his patient was satisfactory on the doctor's side and bringing much cheer to Culver Hampton.

It was, in fact, quite a little family party. Hampton took the doctor into his full confidence, as Diana had done. It was while the young woman was temporarily engaged in her housekeeping duties that Hampton spoke in a low, guarded voice.

"You can't fool me, McLaren. I'm about due to slip out. I'm not worrying except for Diana. You'll keep *him* in order, won't you, for my little lass's sake?"

"I will," said the doctor. "What's more, I begin to think I have something on Red Grierson that will tend to make him sing low at the showdown. You never had any reason to suspect," he asked, "that he might have had a partner in this mine proposition before he picked you up?"

"No—yes—sometimes I've fancied that," replied Hampton. "But as no third party has ever appeared in our dealings I've given little thought of it. I've more often suspected that Grierson has something on his mind. Whether it comes from bad whiskey or bad conscience I've never been sure, but he certainly has bad dreams. One night he woke us all up with a yell. He came out of that tunnel where he sleeps, half-dressed and with that everlasting rifle gripped in his fists.

" 'Go away!' he raved, pointing his weapon at nobody I could see. 'Go away, or by God I'll drill you!"

"Interesting for a psychoanalyst to figure out," said McLaren with a laugh, making a grave mental note, however, of the incident.

Having no desire to have another interview at present with Grierson, McLaren left the cave before noon, about which time the red giant usually came for his dinner. The doctor had already made up his mind that, now he was on the trail to a mystery's possible solution, he would make a full day of it. And he had conceived a little plan which he wished to test out at once.

So far as Hampton knew to the contrary, the doctor left the mesa then and there, but outside, to Diana, McLaren said, "I'd like to have had you show me where Grierson keeps his bone collection. But he may be watching and I don't want to involve you in what would seem to him like betrayal of his secrets. It's better he should not suspect that even you have any knowledge of his bone cache. Still, I wish you'd show me the trail by which he goes and comes to and from the mine. I mean to watch him today, Diana, for reasons I'll tell you later if results justify. Perhaps he doesn't know I'm on the mesa today and maybe won't make inquiries of you. But if he does, just say I've come and gone. So far as you're concerned, Diana, that's true."

She asked no questions, but gave him a look full of utter trust. She pointed out the direction of the mine and McLaren placed it exactly by his memory of that muffled explosion.

"There isn't any trail," she said. "The ground is all rocky or of broken stone. But

he has to come down between those two big boulders up there, following the wash between.

"You can watch from up there," she added, indicating a flat-topped boulder a little to the north and east of the camp. "That's where I was when I saw him bury the bone."

"That's good enough, Diana," said McLaren. "All right. I'll be back day after tomorrow again, unless you make the night or day signal in the meantime."

He left her then, going down the trail past the spring and the timber's edge to the open mesa, as if returning to Arrowhead or going fishing in the north fork. But when he got well away from the camp he changed his course. Taking advantage of every bit of available cover he reached the spot where he had found and re-hidden the femoral bone.

Picking up this relic he swung his course from south to east and then slightly north, bringing himself in a wide circle to Diana's flat-topped boulder behind the mesa camp and at the base of the vertebral range. From this high point he surveyed the vicinity where he supposed the mine to be.

In a little while he saw Red Grierson emerge from what looked like a tunnel excavation. The man appeared for only a few seconds. He went in again after picking up some mining implement.

"Now's my chance!" muttered McLaren.

Quickly descending he made the best of rough going to the two boulders with the wash between. Through this Diana had said Grierson must pass. There McLaren left the femoral bone, not in the middle of the passage, nor fully exposed, but a little to one side and half-buried among loose stones.

He knew that Grierson could hardly fail to see it. The man might wonder how it had escaped his eye until now. But not having any reason to suspect another's knowledge of his secret, he would perhaps believe that his eye had just never chanced to light on it before.

McLaren really cared little what Grierson might choose to think. Mainly the doctor wanted to see what effect this latest finding would have upon the bone-collector. The doctor returned to his vantage point on the flat-topped boulder. And there he lay, flat on his stomach, watching for hours. Hours that seemed interminable for it was a warm day and the heat of the rock became almost unbearable. Grierson had failed to return at noon.

After that first day on the mesa McLaren had carried no canteen, relying upon the waters of the forks for drink. Now, as the scorching hours dragged, he would have given his best rod for that canteen—full.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, the prospector still making no move for the cave, McLaren was of a mind to risk going to the spring for a long, cold drink. But just as he had decided on the move he saw the lumbering form of the red-haired giant following a tortuous course down from the mine and toward the camp. McLaren flattened himself on the rock-top, only the top of his head from the eyes up appearing above the edge.

Grierson came to the wash between the two gigantic boulders.

McLaren suffered a pang of acute disappointment as the man passed the bone, apparently failing to see it. After waiting all those hours and suffering tortures of heat and thirst!

But a few paces beyond the half-buried bone Grierson suddenly stopped turned and stared. He *had* seen it. But his mind had been intent upon some other matter at the moment and the significance of that protruding white object took a second or two to register in his brain.

When it did register, the result was startling. The man stared, backed off, advanced, then fell into the attitude of some wild beast or human monster crouched and alert to give or repel attack. Only for a few seconds did he hold this pose—rigid and tense. Then he glanced furtively about him in every visible direction. Satisfied that he was unobserved he fairly sprang at that bone, wrenched it from among the stones and swiftly concealed it inside his half-open shirt.

The thing possessed and momentarily hidden, Grierson resumed his downward course, but now in a kind of mad, panic-stricken rush. But again he stopped short. Probably in that moment the instinct of self-preservation whispered caution and calm.

Then, having again satisfied himself that he was unobserved, he turned swiftly to his left, entered a blind alley among the rocks

and, still visible to McLaren from his high vantage-point, proceeded to get rid of that bone permanently. Under a projecting boulder he reached down and lifted aside the flat scaled-off slab of rock which had defied Diana's efforts even to move.

Next, Grierson clawed aside a pile of small broken stone and debris, placed the bone in the hollow formed and re-covered the hole as it had been when he came to it.

"Fine!" muttered McLaren. "Now, what?"

The red giant wiped perspiration from his brow with the back of his hairy hand. He repeated the operation several times, shaking the moisture off his hand with a sidewise flip.

"Some sweat—and not all from exercise!" reflected the watcher on the rock.

Then Red Grierson, probably feeling better with that thing out of sight, went toward the camp in the timber grove, but walking like a man in great mental agitation.

McLaren's hope was that now, before it grew dark, he might seize the opportunity to examine that cache. And luck favored him, although he did not know that the circumstance was not so fortunate for Diana Hampton. Two minutes after Grierson entered the camp under the overhanging rock, he came out again and started at an even wilder gait toward the rope-bridge.

As a matter of fact, the moment he had appeared before Hampton and his daughter he had shouted at Diana, "Has that dam' meddlin' doctor been here?"

"Yes," said Diana with a calmness she did not feel. "He was here this morning."

"Is he gone?"

"Oh, yes—hours ago."

"Did yuh let the bridge down after him?"

Diana was cornered for the moment. Here was something she and McLaren had forgotten to prearrange—in explanation, at least.

"I don't know," she answered irrelevantly. "I mean—No, I didn't. I forgot. I—I've been busy with dad and getting supper."

"Yuh forgot—huh?" snarled Grierson. "Hain't I told yuh a thousan' times that's somethin' yuh can't afford to forget?"

And with that, he spun about, stamped out and away toward the chasm of the upper south fork. McLaren, who saw the move, did not think to account for it. He had forgotten, too! For the moment he could only see luck in the man's temporary departure in another direction.

Swiftly he took advantage of the time that must elapse before Grierson could get back. The bridge was about a mile west of the camp. Leaving the flat-topped rock he made all possible speed to the spot where he had seen Grierson bury that bone.

Two minutes after his arrival there he had the contents of that cache revealed. And it did not take his trained professional eye two minutes more to decide the nature of what lay outspread before his gaze.

They were human bones, the bones of a man—at least, so far as they went. A few parts were missing, notably the skull. And they were for the most part picked clean and sun-bleached white. They bore no evidence of a bullet fracture. With one exception they were damaged only by the teeth of animals.

The exception was the right thigh bone, which was badly fractured in two places.

McLaren wasted no more time than was necessary to an understanding examination. Hastily covering the grim relics, leaving the stone pile and the slab as he had found them, he hastened back to his high vantage-point and looked toward the chasm and the rope-bridge.

The sun was low on the horizon. Back of McLaren, a moon nearing the full was above the pinnacles of the vertebral range. Soon it would be dusk. But he gave no thought to time or the matter of getting back to Arrowhead. He was like a bloodhound hot on the scent.

Away over by the rope-bridge the bulky figure of Grierson with the rifle tucked under his arm, was silhouetted against the lustered haze of sundown. The man seemed to be standing there, staring at the rope-bridge and pondering some matter.

Suddenly Grierson turned and came back at a great pace to the timbered area. His movements were those of a man in a towering rage or wrought to the breaking-point by suspicion, or fear, or both.

"Trouble with a capital T is heading for that camp!" muttered McLaren. "Guess I'll take a look in on this. But here's hoping I don't have to show myself—yet!"

He waited until Grierson had reached the timber grove and entered the great rock

recess. Then the doctor dropped down the back of his high perch and made for the camp of the mesa-dwellers.

The dusk was now thickening rapidly. Among the trees it was almost dark—rendered darker in the shadows by the contrasting moonlight shafts, also by the glow of a cooking fire and a lighted hurricane lantern in the recess under the overhanging rock-lip.

McLaren had no difficulty in coming within sight and hearing of all that was going on there.

CHAPTER XIV

SOMEBODY'S LAST STAND

CULVER HAMPTON, his face drawn and disturbed, was half sitting up on his ground pallet. Diana was busy at the cooking-fire, conducting herself with an assumed calmness perhaps intended to disarm Grierson's rage and suspicion.

The red giant was standing in the middle of the rock-shelter, the rifle still under his arm. His head was thrust forward and he was speaking in a loud, harsh voice.

"Yuh forgot, did yuh? Mebbe yuh forgets likewise he never come in that way a-tall, unless yuh're lyin' and was there this mornin' to raise the ropes to this side at his signal! Then yuh goes with him when he leaves —to kiss him good-bye maybe an' let the ropes down again!

"But yuh forgets just what yuh did—huh? Forgets because yuh're hidin' somethin'!"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Grierson," said Diana coolly, but with a marked quiver in her voice. She adroitly turned a flapjack on the skillet as she added, "I don't know what you mean."

"Hell!" shouted Grierson. "Unless yuh're lyin' yuh're forgettin' somethin' else! Didn't yuh let the ropes down from this side arter he went out two days ago? An' didn't I make sure yuh lets 'em down by goin' to see for muhself? Well, I ain't been off the mesa, an' the ropes has been down on t'other side ever since! Then how in hell does he get in this mornin', unless you're there to make the bridge fast? He couldn't throw them across from the spur side an' tie 'em this side. His arms ain't as long as that! An' how does he get out this mornin' when the ropes is still down t'other side? He couldn't cross an' then untie the side he left!

"Either yuh're lyin', gal, or *he's still on the mesa!*"

"Red Grierson, you've even less brains than I thought!" said Diana, continuing with her domestic preparations for supper, although McLaren knew she must be suffering mental panic. How he blamed himself for this slip-up!

"Why," she went on, "you're admitting yourself that he couldn't have come in by the rope-bridge this morning, because it was down on the wrong side for incoming."

"Then how did he get in if you wasn't there on signal or somethin'!"

"Same way he went out probably!" Diana snapped impatiently, pouring some fresh batter on the skillet.

"Well, you're the one can tell me what way that is!" bellowed Grierson. "An' by God, gal, if yuh don't tell me—"

"I don't know about that any more than you do!" Diana flared.

"Hold on, Grierson!" said the sick man in a voice that had a recrudescence of commanding strength in it. "Kindly keep your bad-man tactics for the sort of persons who might be impressed by them. You have never known my daughter to equivocate, much less lie, about anything. She says she did not assist Dr. McLaren's entrance to the mesa, nor his exit. She also says she does not know how he comes or goes. That is enough for me, and it must be enough for you, Grierson! For the rest, Dr. McLaren has made no secret that he has his own private way of coming in, at least. The only secret is how and where. That is something for you to find out for yourself. Neither my daughter nor I are in the least interested in this detail, save that the secret entrance to the mesa may bring a rush to this precious mesa of ours if you don't keep a discreet hold on your tongue and actions!"

After this somewhat strenuous speech, delivered in a white-heat of anger, Culver Hampton slumped back upon his pallet, gasping for breath.

For a moment McLaren believed it would be necessary for him to appear on the scene, much as he wished the contrary. That might spoil everything. He was not quite ready.

Watching keenly he hung in the wind of

indecision. Diana had instantly abandoned the flapjack on the skillet and rushed to her father's side. Grierson stood glowering and glaring in rage, confused by the situation he himself had created.

Then McLaren heard Hampton's voice, a little catchy, but clear, saying, "All right, Di. I'm all right. Just lost breath—for a moment."

And at the same time Grierson—of all people!—supplied the touch of comedy which can break the spell of any dramatic situation or impending tragedy. He suddenly set down the rifle and rushed to the rock-and-mud-built fireplace.

"And now, damn it!" he almost wailed, "the flapjacks is burnin' to a cinder! This is a helluva camp!

"All right, gal," he presently mumbled. "Let it go—till later, anyway. I'm tired as a dog an' hungry as a bear. But," with a last growl for the night, "I'll tell the world that doctor'll bear watchin'!"

The doctor referred to grinned in the shadows among the trees. All was well. The angel of peace had again temporarily entered the camp, even if its wings were sadly ruffled and its feathers moulting.

McLaren now felt that it was safe to go. He was relieved that the altercation had not reached the point where his appearance would have been an imperative duty. For, no matter what he thought he knew about Red Grierson, he had little or no evidence against the man that was not circumstantial—no real case with which to pin the red ruffian with his back to the wall and lay down the law to him!

He swiftly slipped away from the vicinity of the cave and came out from the timber's south edge upon the open mesa. This was now illumined by the light of the near-full moon.

Now for Arrowhead!

But all at once McLaren found himself in a quandary. How was he to leave the mesa without Grierson discovering that he had been on it up to, and after he, the red giant, had discovered that the rope-bridge had not been utilized?

All McLaren had to do was draw up the bridge to the mesa side and cross to the spur side. But if he did that he could not leave it down the way he found it. It would be significant to Grierson if, next morning, he discovered the rope-bridge stretched and made fast at both ends, or let down on the wrong side! To make matters worse for McLaren, the smooth face of his comparatively easy point of entrance, Slide Rock, was insurmountable in retreat!

He wished now that he had taken Pity-All Plutarch a little more into his confidence, or had had him bring the rope proposed for the foreman's own convenience should he receive the signal of the red light on the apex. For a few minutes McLaren stood pondering his dilemma. Now, as ever, he hated the thought of trying that hazardous trip around the back range of pinnacle rocks.

But presently he set off down the mesa's north edge to a point at the top of the gentle slope of the north fork. There, coming up from the Lions' Pool, he and Diana had hidden the red lantern.

"It's the only way!" he muttered. "Plute may be sore at first, but he'll understand—later."

Carrying the lantern, unlighted, he hurried to the high apex of the mesa overlooking Arrowhead Ranch. It was now late enough for Plutarch to be giving some thought to the evening's poker game and, in consequence, the doctor's return. McLaren felt sure that his red signal would not long remain unmarked.

At the apex he found a small depression—a rain-wash—which would conveniently hide his light from eyes farther back on the mesa. In this depression there was a fair-sized, spreading sumach bush—a piece of vegetation which thrived on the occasional drainage of that hollow.

In the shelter of this bush McLaren lighted the red lantern. When the light was going well he prepared to move forward into the open, keeping the sumach back of him. But suddenly his eyes were arrested by the gleam of something among the sand and debris under the sumach.

The thing that was catching the light of his lantern, or a moon-ray, was a nickel-plated belt-buckle. He reached forward with his left hand and pulled on the thing. It was attached to a piece of leather. What the sand and debris gave up as a whole was a cartridge belt, still with some shells in it, and a pistol holster. The latter, however, was empty.

With a sense of imminent discovery mak-

ing his heart beat faster, McLaren swung the lantern about him, swiftly surveying all the ground under the spreading sumach.

The light revealed some shreds of clothing with buttons still attached, and—

"Good God!" gasped McLaren as another object met and held his gaze. "It's—it's the place!"

What he meant and so inadequately put in words, even to himself, was that he had indubitably discovered the spot where had occurred the last act in the tragedy of that man who had cried in the night over two years before.

"Of course—*here!*" muttered McLaren. "Where he would naturally have come in a last hope of attracting the attention of the Arrowhead bunch. And the sumach—the hot sun by day—shade. And Grierson hasn't been here—afraid of showing himself on this point."

For a few minutes McLaren's impulse was to let Plutarch go, remain the night on the mesa and carry his inquiry into this latest discovery to a finish. But he downed the impulse. He needed better light to examine this ground carefully for some clue to the dead man's identity.

His identity—that was all-important. Given that, McLaren thought he could reconstruct a drama that would put Grierson's back to the wall. Also, he must have rest. Tomorrow he would return. He must have rest—now!—against what tomorrow might require of him.

His heart pounding painfully, his mind awhirl with excitement, his scalp prickling with awe of what he had briefly glimpsed under that sumach, McLaren crawled out to the mesa's uttermost point and waved the red lantern.

Every minute for about ten minutes he repeated this performance, between-times setting the lantern on the ground with his hat and body shielding the back of it.

At the end of ten minutes he saw a spot of white light waved in a circle away down behind the bunkhouse of Arrowhead Ranch. Then the spot of light began to move swiftly toward the entrance to the south fork, which was below and to McLaren's left.

At that, out went the red lantern. By the light of the moon McLaren hurried back to the point where he had picked up the lamp. Re-hiding it for Diana's possible need, he then cut across the mesa and down the steep face of broken rock to the pool under Slide Rock. Twice on his rapid journey he caught sight of a slithering body among the boulders and once a pair of yellow eyes glowing in the moonlight. But he paid less attention to the lions than they did to him. They got out of his path more quickly than he avoided theirs!

Pity-All Plutarch arrived at the rock about the same time McLaren did.

"That you, doc?" asked the foreman. "I seen yer signal."

"Got the rope?" asked McLaren, panting from exertion.

"Sure—an' all heeled f'r trouble."

"There won't be any tonight, Plute," said McLaren, rising from a small drink of water at the pool. "But I couldn't get out any other way. Sorry if I've disappointed you and made all this trouble for nothing, but—"

"Tha's all right, ol'-timer," said Plutarch. "I sorta opines yuh'll let me in on this jackpot as soon as yer turn comes to deal the cyards."

"Thanks, Plute. I'll try to deal you a hand with some real play in it—gunplay, maybe. In the meantime, make fast the rope and chuck it down.

"And this time we leave the rope down and fast on top," he added. "I'll need it first thing in the morning. Also, I've an idea you'll be using it yourself, Plute, before you're a day older."

CHAPTER XV

VOICES OF THE PAST

DISCOVERIES on the previous day of the bone cache and the holster belt, to say nothing of other things, decided McLaren that he would waste no time in bringing Grierson to book and delivering the Hamptons from his brutal tyranny. Having now a rope made fast at Slide Rock he could enter and leave the mesa at any time without Grierson, or even Diana, being aware of his presence there. And this day he planned to keep his trip secret even from the girl.

The week's hard goings and comings had hardened his muscles, at first a little slack

from city life. On the following morning he felt fit for another visit to the Mesa of Lions. Although he did not intend to fish he took his rod and creel with him in case he should meet Red Grierson. Even the girl might wonder at his presence on the mesa without some apparent reason—that is, if he did not visit her father professionally that day.

This time he carried a canteen which he filled at the pool below Slide Rock. An hour after sunrise found him at the high apex point where he had swung the lantern on the previous night. He immediately crawled under the sumach bush, which spread a thin but grateful shade for some yards around on the otherwise exposed and sun-stricken point. A drink from his canteen also proved highly grateful. The relief the cool moisture gave his parched throat brought him to a realization of what the man whose tragedy had ended here must have suffered before death drugged his agony. For he did not discover then, or afterward, that the man had had a canteen.

As soon as he was rested from the stiff climb to the mesa McLaren began a deliberate study of the relics he had hastily glanced over on the previous night. His belief was now confirmed that here was the spot to which a wounded man had crawled as a last resort, and that here he had died.

All the necessary evidences of that were here—the belt and holster, some shreds of torn clothing, portions of a boot which had been considerably gnawed—by small rodents probably—and a few bones.

One of the latter he gravely placed in his creel and made the covering fast with a curiously slow, deliberate movement of his hand. Then he set aside the creel, placing it by his cased rod and began a closer study of the ground and the articles found there. The belt and empty holster particularly interested him. He knew it would avail nothing to look for the weapon which had once occupied that holster. Whatever had happened to it, it was not likely to be here or hereabout. The man had not had it in his possession throughout that terrible week of suffering. Otherwise he would have fired shots to attract attention or to frighten off the lions which were unafraid of a crippled man.

Pity-All Plutarch had heard no shots—only distant sounds like a man or an animal crying in the night. Yet the man had had cartridges. The belt still contained quite a number. He was not out of ammunition He simply did not have the weapon which those shells fitted.

That there were a few bones under this sumach was natural enough. That there were not more was explainable by the fact that the rest had been scattered all over the mesa —probably by cougars.

The clothing? There was no whole garment; only shreds of things hardly identifiable. Some buttons, riveted to the rough ready-made prospector garb, still adhered to the rotten material, whose shreds were half-buried in the sand and débris of the wash.

McLaren pulled the pieces loose. In some cases the rotted material fell apart in his hands at the slightest strain. But in one piece, which had been almost completely covered by sand, he found the remains of an inside pocket from which protruded a small object of leather.

McLaren eagerly seized upon the latter. It was a small stamped-leather case. But that two initials had been sunk in the outer leather he could never have deciphered them, for the gilding of the letters had long since become obliterated:

J. D.

Inside the case was a photograph, not only faded but so badly stained that the features of the person pictured were indistinguishable. But it was a picture of a woman—probably of a young woman. On the lower part of it there were some faint lines, mere scratches which McLaren had difficulty in deciphering. This much he established:

Ev. . . . . t. . . . . Jim
Feb. . . . . 2. . . .

McLaren placed the little photo-case in his own pocket. There was a queer fullness in his throat and a mist in his eyes. Here was a phase of the tragedy he did not care to dwell upon overmuch.

But he had a clue to the identity of the man who had died on this spot. "J. D."—and his first name was probably James—"Jim."

Having gleaned all the more obvious relics from the ground McLaren next began to comb the earth inch by inch. This minute search yielded nothing at first but some minor bones, some no bigger than detached finger-joints. He was about to give up in the belief that the ground had given up all it held when he found—the ring!

It was of gold and, of course, untarnished. Although caked with dirt the yellow gleam of one exposed part had caught his eye. It was a man's seal-ring, and at the first picking away of dirt McLaren perceived that it had some design on it.

He wetted the small object from his canteen; washed it clean; picked out the seal-face with the point of his pocket-knife; washed it again, then scrubbed until it was dry and bright.

The design was of a conventional heart. Beneath this was a motto which McLaren, after some difficulty—for the engraved words were in a foreign language and in reverse—deciphered as:

Jamais arrière."

On the apex point, sitting under the sumach bush, looking out as from the top of the world over the plains below and to the distant Pacific, McLaren sat for a long while pondering this matter and these clues.

"J. D." might have been a man of good family; a foreigner, possibly, or born of foreign parents. Perhaps French, by the language of the motto. McLaren somehow pictured him as a scapegrace son of some aristocratic European family, or an adventure-loving youth who had wandered far from his ancestral roof-tree.

But apart from this he thought he perceived a story—the story immediately preceding the culmination of the adventurer's life—as clearly as if he had read it in print or seen the drama enacted.

More than ever, however, he felt unprepared to tell anybody what he thought he perceived as the truth. It was, even yet, so circumstantial in its pointers. But several things appeared beyond dispute. Whatever had happened to J. D. in the first place, in the end the wounded man had crawled to this place in a last hope of attracting the attention of that ranch which doubtless he had sighted from the mesa.

He had had no gun; otherwise when he reached this spot he would assuredly have fired off the shells remaining in his belt. The Arrowhead outfit would have heard a single shot, even, for in that dry air sound carried far. That was why Grierson used a "silencer."

He had crawled to this spot, for he had a double-fractured thigh. The professional eye of McLaren had discovered that when he examined the bones in the cache. He had also been satisfied that that double fracture was not the work of animals, but the result of a very violent blow.

In none of the bones which McLaren had found, or otherwise seen, had he discovered any evidence of a bullet-wound as having been even a contributing cause of death.

What, then, had happened?

"J. D."—"Jim"—the heart design—*"Jamais arrière."* But for that motto McLaren would have believed, in connection with the picture in the leather case, that the conventional heart on the seal ring was but a love-symbol; the ring, perhaps, a gift from the woman of the picture.

But the motto made him think differently and perceive that, with "James D—" as a lead, it should be easy to establish the man's full name and general identity. All McLaren had to do was to make a trip to the nearest public library of any pretension, get some book on heraldry and look for that heart-crest. If it appeared in conjunction with a similar motto and a surnmae beginning with "D—," he would know whose trail had ended on the Mesa of Lions, or at least what manner of man he was.

BUT he disliked the thought of leaving the vicinity of the mesa—and Diana Hampton—for even a day. Some climax was imminent here and he must be on hand to aid, if not save, the girl.

The heart—*Jamais arrière!* While McLaren's mind wandered from this to that angle of the whole mystery, ever it came back to that seal-crest and the French motto.

Why did it insist so upon recognition? Why was he so subconsciously filled with the vague idea that he ought to recognize it? Not that it really mattered who the man was, now that he was dead and seemingly forgotten, save as knowledge of the luckless adventurer's identity might strengthen the hand against Red Grierson's.

The latter he more than suspected of knowing all about what happened to James D—.

If only the man's family had not been —probably—French, but English or Irish or Scottish, McLaren thought he might have been able to do better off-hand.

As McLaren's name suggests, although himself born American, his father had been of Scottish birth. Old McLaren, while he lived, had ever been a keen lover of history—with a marked partiality for the history of his native Scotland. And then, while he was momentarily thinking of that Celtic parent of his, the subconscious insistence to recognition of the crest and motto seemed to come couched in the voice of his father.

"Eh, lad," he seemed to hear in the familiar, broad, Highland accent, "I'm surprised at ye. Did I waste hours o' an evenin' tellin' ye the grand tales that ye will ha' forgot them a'ready?"

Ay, they were the grand tales his father used to tell him! Mainly of thrilling incidents in Scottish history, of Scotland's glorious fight for independence. Wallace routing a half-dozen armed Englishmen with nothing but a fishing-rod; for the great Scottish patriot's adroitness in placing a barbed hook was, on this occasion at least, more disconcerting than broadsword!

Robert the Bruce, caught without armor, cleaving the charging knight de Bohun with a light battle-ax—cleaving him to the chin through helm and closed visor!

The Black Douglas capturing the English-held castle by blocking the portcullis with a load of hay concealing a dozen trusty fellows!

All at once McLaren started. A great light dawned. At first he could hardly believe that the answer had come to him; whispered to him out of the past—out of the dark, as it were—by his own father!

Yet, as his father's son, he ought to have remembered and recognized that crest at once. Still, it seemed to him then that it was less his own remembering than that some occult influence had led him by natural sequences and associations to one other story —*the* story.

He remembered now how his father's eyes used to shine when he told it and his voice at the end break with a gulp of dramatic emotion.

It was the story of the dying Bruce requesting the trusty Douglas—the Black Douglas—to bear his heart in a silver casket for burial in the Holy Land. The Black Douglas, attempting to carry out the request, encountered the Saracens in force, made his last stand in a losing fight and, ere being cut down, hurled the silver casket into the thick of the enemy and charged to death after it, crying:

"On brave heart! Douglas will follow thee!"

"J. D.—?" This man who had died on the Mesa of Lions had been a descendant of the Black Douglases of Scotland. For "the heart of the Bruce" was their proud crest!

What of the motto's being in French? Abbreviations of the famous heroic speech varied with various branches of the family. Sometimes it was "Onward." Again it might be "Forward." In this case it was *"Jamais arrière,"* "Never behind."

McLaren was elated, while strangely awed, by the manner in which, as it seemed to him, the answer to the mute question of that crest and motto had come to him. He wondered if Jim Douglas had ever told Red Grierson that story—that is, if—as he suspected—they had been prospecting partners. It seemed hardly possible that Douglas had not done so some night in campfire intimacy. He might have told it more in pride than vanity, especially if Grierson noticed the ring and asked him about its engraved legend.

At the thought that perhaps Grierson knew the story of the heart of the Bruce, McLaren felt an impulse to play another trick upon him. If the man had any guilt in his conscience concerning the death of this later Douglas, what McLaren thought to do would surely bring out the yellow behind the red exterior—possibly lead Grierson to a complete self-betrayal.

He chuckled to think what might happen if—granting that Douglas had told Grierson the story—the red giant should come face to face with—say, a ghostly message from the same Douglas, lettered on the slab over his bones.

"Douglas will follow thee!"

With this grimly humorous thought in his fancy, although not quite sure how he could effect it without paint or tar, McLaren picked up his rod and creel and started with

the idea of at least reconnoitering the camp. He was satisfied that he had gleaned all that was to be gleaned under the sumach bush. But he had hardly left the cover of the sumach and ascended to the more open mesa before he halted and dropped to cover.

He saw Grierson, with a knapsack on his back and the everlasting rifle in his hand, heading from the timbered area toward the rope-bridge.

McLaren watched, speculating, as Grierson presently raised, made fast and crossed the rope-bridge, unfastening it on the other side and dropping it to the mesa side, thus making Hampton and Diana virtual prisoners until it should please him to return.

Apparently the man was off to town again. But he could not be taking ore or metal. The knapsack seemed empty, flapping loosely on his back.

McLaren surmised as the probable truth that Grierson, his nerves—or nerve—shaken by various incidents, was on an excursion whose objective was more of that bootleg whiskey which made an abnormal fiend of an ordinary brute.

"All right, my friend," quoth the doctor, addressing the distant figure which was now receding down the opposite spur, heading obliquely as for the railroad station at Pueblo. "You can't get away from yourself or your conscience. And you can't get away from your former partner, either. Douglas is following you—a white-hot ghost at your heels. And when you get back, I, his mouthpiece, am ready to tackle you!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE RED SIGNAL

GRIERSON again temporarily away, McLaren saw no reason to keep his unscheduled visit to the mesa a secret from Diana. As soon as the man was several miles away and still heading for Pueblo, the doctor visited his patient in the cave.

Hampton's condition was not good. He was suffering reaction from the previous night's excitation and strain. McLaren felt sure that before long the man must die of sheer weakness. He expected, and hoped for Diana's sake, that the end would come in sleep—a gentle drifting-out.

McLaren stayed to a noon meal prepared by Diana. Thereafter, frequent excursions to the timber's edge revealing no sign of Grierson's coming back, the doctor lingered, the sick man and his daughter apparently taking comfort from his presence.

It was while the girl was doing scout-duty at the timber's edge that Culver Hampton laid a hand on the physician's arm and said quietly, "You'll take care of Diana, Doctor? I mean—see that she's taken care of?"

"Don't worry about that, Mr. Hampton," was the reply.

"Thanks, Doctor. I'm not worrying—any more."

It was near sundown when McLaren left. As her father had fallen asleep in the meantime, Diana walked to the timber's edge with Ross McLaren. When he told her what she must expect soon, she received the news gravely but this time with calm.

"I know," she whispered. "I've been thinking it would be for the best—after last night. He can't stand any more scenes like that."

"I'll come again tomorrow," said McLaren. "I'll come direct to the cave. In the meantime, don't forget the lantern. It's in place—all ready."

He held out his hand. She laid hers in it and their clasp lingered a moment.

"Good night, Diana. Take care of yourself"—then on an impulse he added—"for me!"

She made no reply, but the slender fingers of her sun-stained hand moved in his palm.

Then McLaren returned to Slide Rock, conscious, since the utterance of those two impulsive words, of a new thing filling his mind and heart with a strangely soothing elation. After two successive days on the mesa he was physically tired when he reached Arrowhead. He went to bed directly after supper, much to the disappointment of Pity-All, who saw little fun in a three-handed game.

McLaren's last thought before he dropped off to sleep was that, in view of Hampton's condition, the "tackling" of Grierson might have to be postponed.

But mere man has no control over circumstances.

As he afterward fixed the time, it was about eleven-thirty at night. He was in a deep, heavy sleep in the guest-room of the

Arrowhead ranchhouse when he was awakened by a sharp tapping on the window.

Outside, it was bright moonlight. Against the effulgent glow he saw the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders beyond the window. He recognized Pity-All Plutarch.

Hastily rising, McLaren unlatched and drew open the double swing-windows. "What's the trouble, Plute?" he asked sharply.

"Slip on yer duds, Doc, an' don't forget yer gun!" whispered the foreman. "That darn red light's burnin' on the mesa top. I sees it as I'm goin' over to my bunk after a rotten threesome. You bein' here, I dunno who lights it or how long it's been burnin'. I think maybe you has slipped away—jes' bluffin' about turnin' in."

But McLaren did not hear anything beyond the statement that the red signal was alight. He was putting on his clothes as fast as he could. When the doctor came out through the window—all the Arrowhead buildings were in darkness, their occupants gone to bed—Plutarch, who had been temporarily absent and was just coming back from somewhere, stared at the creel slung over the other's shoulder.

"Hell!" said Pity-All. "Are we goin' fishin'?"

"Not for trout, Plute. But tonight I expect to catch something on the fly at that. Come on, the cards are dealt. Let's see what hands we've got to play. Are you heeled?"

"No," said the foreman with a note of reproof. "When I travels in the night I carries nothin' but a toothbrush!"

They had not been standing still as they talked. Plutarch, pulling on the doctor's arm, had started for the corral.

"I saddles up a coupla ponies while you're gettin' ready for the ball," said he. "We can make fast time to the south fork anyway."

They did. McLaren was not an expert rider, but he managed to stick on. The range-pony did the rest. It followed close on the heels of Pity-All's wild lead. Plutarch seemed to appreciate that the "pot" was opened for him at last and he was eager to be in on the game.

In less than five minutes they were in the willow-forest at the base of the apex point. Up there the lantern shone like a red star against the sky. Quickly dismounting, they left the ponies to their own sweet will and plunged into and up the south fork, McLaren now taking the lead.

Despite that he was physically tired—this would make his third trip to the mesa within thirty hours—McLaren was stimulated by the emergency call.

"I'm glad you thought of the horses, Plute," he gasped as they scrambled their way toward Slide Rock. "It saves—time, at least."

Down the fastened rope they slid to the slab-crossing by the pool where McLaren had caught that initial big fellow. Once on the other side they clawed up the steep, loose-rocked bluff to the ledge near the top.

"I smell lions," said Plutarch suddenly.

"Never mind lions," panted McLaren. "Ahead of us there's a tiger to be tackled, I think."

"Blind tiger?" queried the foreman, who was eaten with curiosity.

"Save your breath, Plute—and mine!" gasped the doctor, reaching the mesa level at last and throwing himself down on the ground by way of regaining breath.

"I'm sorta broken-winded myself," admitted Pity-All, squatting by his comrade; "but I ain't been exercisin' like you has the last few days."

He waited until the other had recovered breath, then asked tentatively, "Any instructions, Doc? I ain't askin' what it's all about. But what crime as I scheduled to perpetrate —suicide, homicide, manslaughter or murder?"

"Listen well, Plute. Don't ask me to repeat. There's no time," said McLaren, rising and preparing to continue the rush for the cave. "There are people on the mesa—have been for over two years. You were right all the time. There's a girl and her father—a sick man—and a brute of a red-haired giant who is the limit in bad-men."

"I oncet met a bad-man in Abilene," murmured Plutarch. "But he ain't livin' now."

"They camp in a sort of cave over in the timbered area," McLaren went on, unheeding. "There's been trouble and I expect it has come to a head tonight. This bad-man has got to go—one way or another. I may be able to tackle him myself. But for the girl's sake, if not her father's, I want you to be on hand in case the bad-man drops me. Get that?"

"Sure. But why not let me interview this ructious gent an' you look after the gal?" suggested Pity-All. "I'm plumb scared when it comes to tacklin' females."

"Do just what I say. Stay out of sight, outside the cave, but keep your eyes peeled on all that goes on inside. Is that clear?"

"It's an awful poor hand," grumbled the poker-playing foreman. "But as yuh sez, the hombre that opens may drop."

"Come on, then!"

Again, this time in utter silence, they continued their rapid journey. In fifteen minutes more they came to the timbered edge. Here McLaren slowed up and cautioned Pity-All to move warily. Already they could hear sounds of disturbance from the camp under the overhanging rock-lip—sounds of a girl speaking rapidly, a raucous voice laughing in an insane kind of way, and a faint voice protesting.

McLaren and the ranch foreman reached the spring.

"Now let me go ahead," whispered the doctor. "As soon as I go in you come up as close as you can make it without showing yourself."

Then he advanced boldly and rapidly toward the overhanging rock. Beneath the latter the great recess was lighted by a couple of hurricane lanterns. A disconcerting scene presented itself to McLaren's vision.

Grierson, insanely intoxicated, was advancing upon Diana, who was backed up against the rude dinner-table. His face was the color of a cut melon and nearly as moist. His eyes were glaring, his mouth leering, and he was saying with a drunken attempt at humorous generosity:

"Gimme one kiss, gal, an' I'll call it square. Ain't that lettin' ye down easy?"

The girl's face was white and twitching. Her hair, like the rest of her, generally disordered, indicated that she had been more or less on the defensive for some little time.

Culver Hampton was sitting up on the ground pallet. With utterances that were mere gasps he was pleading with the red ruffian.

"Grierson, for God's sake! You don't want—to live—with a dying man's curse!"

At his speech Grierson's face took on a frightful expression. It seemed as if a random shot had struck at his very heartbeat. But he hid his agony behind a rage, real or assumed.

"Shut up—you!" he roared. "I've listened to yer dyin' bleatin's long enough. Die if yuh wants to, but close yer trap!"

Then Grierson, resuming his inane grin, advanced again upon Diana, she, trying to back off farther, upset the dinner-table behind her. The girl herself nearly fell, but quickly recovered before Grierson could seize her. At the same time, as if she had not felt driven to the necessity until this moment, she whipped a small automatic pistol from her dress and leveled it at the red giant's breast.

For a moment he stared, surprised. Then he burst out in a guffaw of laughter. It may have been the diminutive size of that weapon, or merely his drunken indifference to danger, but he swiftly struck the little weapon from her hand, sending the .25 spinning to the other end of the cave.

It did not explode when it struck the ground. Diana, in her haste or agitation, had forgotten to unlock the "safety." Grierson had been in less danger than even he knew.

Once more he advanced upon the girl. And now Dr. Ross McLaren thought it high time for him to take a hand in the game. As coolly as he may have approached that maniac in ambulance days and taken the gun from his hand, he came into the illumination of the rock recess, calmly put the table upright on its four legs, unslung and placed his creel upon it, and said with a quiet professional note, "What seems to be the nature of the trouble here?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHOWDOWN!

McLAREN'S effort to bring about a cool discussion of matters failed this time. As Culver Hampton sank back on his pallet with a sigh of relief, and Diana rushed to his side, Red Grierson made a dart for his rifle. It had been resting against the rock wall at the mouth of the tunnel to his right. This was the tunnel in which he slept. Before he could reach it McLaren had him covered with his automatic and had sharply called the ruffian to a dead halt.

"I'm not asking you to put up your hands, Grierson," said he, still calmly. "I've got a

lot to say and I might get as tired leveling this pistol as you would holding up your paws.

"Just step back a bit from that rifle—over to the middle. There! Now back up against the rock-wall—fine! Stay that way. I think I can get my automatic out and into action quicker than you can reach that rifle."

"What in hell d'yuh want?" snarled Grierson, obeying instructions to the letter, nevertheless. "Yuh came here a-doctorin' an' agreed not to butt in on things that don't consarn yuh!"

"Unless I saw anything crooked or detrimental to the comfort of my patient and Miss Hampton. And I've seen enough in the last five minutes to justify me under both heads. About crooked work— Well, I've got a message for you, Grierson, from your old partner."

"Pardner? Who? What pardner? What message?" asked Grierson, his red face actually graying.

"You'll probably know when I give you the message. I was to say, *'Douglas will follow you!'*"

The effect of the "message" was all that McLaren had hoped for. Grierson's jaw literally dropped. His eyes widened, and for a moment looked like a head man's. The color of his face bleached out.

"Douglas!" Grierson barely whispered from lips suddenly gone dry. *"Douglas!* I—I never heard—don't know—any Douglas."

"Jim Douglas?" said McLaren with an assumption of vast surprise. "Jim Douglas who came in here with you over two years ago and owns half the mineral deposit mine you found together? For, of course, you sold your half to Mr. Hampton!"

"It's a lie, a dam' lie!" Grierson tried to shout, but the words came in a ludicrous high-pitched whisper. The man's vocal cords seemed momentarily paralyzed.

"Why, no. It's a matter of record," said McLaren, as if pained by the other's stupidity. "I don't mean that you ever filed on the claim with Douglas's name in the papers. But there are other records—lots of them!"

Diana Hampton, satisfied that her father was momentarily all right, had turned her head and was listening with considerable surprise. Her champion knight was now playing a rôle utterly unexpected by her. Culver Hampton, too, had turned his head and was watching the other men with an intelligence which was far more vigorous than his body.

Grierson, with his back to the wall, was licking his lips and making several ineffec-

tual efforts to speak. But all he managed to say was, "Lies—dam' lies, I tell yuh!"

"Suppose you tell us what happened after you and Douglas came in by the back range and made the mineral discovery?" suggested McLaren.

"I dunno what yuh're talkin' about. Dam' lies! Never heard of any Douglas," muttered the man at bay, his eyes shifting craftily from McLaren's face to the rifle by the tunnel entrance.

The doctor's gaze swiftly swept the whole recess and its furnishings as the latter were related to Grierson's position. Unknown to either of the antagonists Diana had recovered the small automatic and again concealed it under her dress.

There was nothing readily within reach of Grierson's hands, save, perhaps, a small box near his feet but set back out of his vision where the ground met the insloping rock-wall in a narrow slot. In the uncertain light it looked like a dried-fruit box.

THE doctor was satisfied that he had the whip-hand. Grierson could reach no weapon either regular or makeshift quicker than he could unlimber the automatic which he had half-thrust back into its holster.

"So you don't remember how and when you and Douglas came in—eh?" he went on. "Suppose, then, I refresh that poor memory of yours. I thought surely you wouldn't have forgotten that important incident, or the ring Douglas used to wear. I mean the interesting story he told you about it. He thought you'd remember it. That's probably why he sent the kind of message he did. Maybe didn't want a stranger to know too much about your mutual affairs and—"

"It's a lie," Grierson suddenly screamed with a hysterical crack in his voice. "He couldn't 'a' sent no message. He's dead —an' I can prove it!"

"Of course he's dead, and who knows it better than you, Grierson? But suppose you let me do the proving. It doesn't really matter when and where you and Jim Douglas met and hitched up the partnership," McLaren went on. "And we'll take it for granted that you two sweated along that hell-ridge back there, looking for color, and at last stumbled on the back way to this mesa. You didn't make the rope bridge cut-off until after you came back to get ready for your next partner and his daughter.

"It wasn't right away, either, that you and Douglas made that rich strike up back here. In the meantime, you and he camped here in this cave."

This was guesswork, if the term can be applied to reasoning deduction. Plutarch had seen the smoke over the timber. Naturally the prospectors must have used the sheltering rock-lip for a camp. They could hardly have missed it, and it was Grierson's camp when the Hamptons came to it. But the red giant's slow mind could not appreciate such simple analogy. His face betrayed the fear that this man knew all these things as facts.

"It was after the discovery of the mine that Jim Douglas had his accident," McLaren continued quietly. "You know it was just an accident, Grierson."

The other man bit. His face lightened with relief.

"Now yuh're talkin' straight and fair," he managed to say. "It was an accident—sure! He fell among the big boulders an' broke his neck."

"I know that—except that it was his thigh, Grierson, not his neck. His right thigh. He broke it in two places, so that if you didn't carry him he could only crawl.

"What happened after that is hardly what you'd call accident, Grierson. You'll admit that yourself, I'm sure."

"I admit nuthin'," snarled the wild beast at bay.

"Oh, that won't make any difference. Let me put the confession in your mouth for you: You and Douglas made a rich strike. Presently you were figuring how best and easiest you could get rid of your partner and keep the secret all to yourself. Maybe you would just have picked a quarrel and shot him down. But the fall Douglas got among the boulders saved you that form of murder. Douglas was in bad shape. There was only one way out and he could never make it with a double-fractured thigh. Even you, powerful brute as you are, could never have carried him up and around the back ridge.

"So you left him—to get a doctor, Grierson. Wasn't that the way of it?"

"That's right—quite right," the red giant

eagerly confirmed. "I had to get help. That's what I went for."

"Of course!" said McLaren. "But you took the injured man's gun away from him before you left, and you didn't come back for weeks and weeks. How about that, Grierson?"

"That's another dam' lie! Nobody could of told yuh that!" roared Grierson, suddenly finding his bull-like voice again, his faculties stimulated by desperation. "I tell yuh it ain't true. I took his gun from him —sure I did—but it was because he wanted to suicide."

"Thought you implied that he was dead of a broken neck?" McLaren countered.

"He wasn't dead—right away. Ain't I tellin' yuh I goes to get a doctor? An' I takes sick myself an' don't have no money to get a doctor for myself, let alone ask one to come up that hell-ridge for nuthin'!"

"Hold on, Grierson! I'm a doctor myself. Not one able-bodied doctor in ten thousand would have refused to try and get Douglas out to a hospital, or at least send somebody in to set that broken thigh. But I know what you did, Grierson, and why you did it. You took his gun so he couldn't signal for help. You knew there was a ranch below the mesa point. That's why there is a silencer on your rifle.

"Hold on, there! Stand still!" McLaren interlarded, as Grierson again started toward his rifle. The automatic pistol had reappeared. The bad-man ground his teeth in impotent rage and resumed his former position when waved to it by the pistol point.

"You just left your partner, Jim Douglas, to die of starvation and fever and blood-poison!" McLaren went on without mercy. "Thirst, too, if it hadn't been for that spring to which the poor devil was able to crawl.

"You left your partner to a bitterness of death few men have been unlucky enough to experience. You left him to bake all day with a broken thigh that made him mad with fever. You left him to lie awake night after night, crying for help or to keep off the cougars that were closing in on a helpless man. And you—you stayed away just long enough to be sure that he was dead before you roped in Culver Hampton and his daughter, using a sick man's money to help your scheme to a fortune and your later aim to get possession of the sick man's daughter—in time.

"But Douglas was following you, brave heart that you are!" McLaren shot with scathing heat at the now cowering Grierson. "You just couldn't get away from him. You found him—bits of him—every so often. Just as you were beginning to forget him a bit of him turns up to mock you, reproach you, haunt you. Even the girl brings you a reminder one day—"

"Lies! *Lies!*" screamed Grierson, clawing at his breast, but too utterly unnerved for aggressive counter-action.

"But you were surrounded, Grierson, by 'a cloud of witnesses,' as the Bible says. You were—"

"*Witnesses!* That's it. There ain't none. Hell!" shouted the red-haired man. "Yuh can't prove a dam' thing. I defies yuh to prove it."

"Oh, I don't have to," McLaren said with a maddening smile. "You, yourself, piled up the witnesses against you—piled 'em up in a little heap among the rocks with a slab over them. Miss Hampton knows where the place is. So do I. I've seen it with my own eyes, Grierson—counted Jim Douglas's bones, listed each and every bit of him that you collected and hid away.

"Too bad you didn't find all of them, Grierson," was his final shot.

"Them ain't witnesses," raved the other. "Yuh got to have witnesses who can talk and say they saw me do anything crooked. I tell yuh he was hurt and I went for a doctor, an' fell sick myself, an'—"

"Red Grierson!" McLaren interrupted in a voice of stern judgment. "I have a witness here who was there when Jim Douglas fell among the rocks; a witness who saw you take his gun away from him and heard his pleading protests; a witness who was with the injured man through all those frightful days and nights when he was dying on this mesa."

His left hand reached to the creel on the rude dinner-table which stood between him and Grierson. He swiftly unlatched the wicker top and extracted from the creel the object he had placed in it at the apex point on the previous day—for it was now past midnight.

"Grierson," he cried in the same voice

of justice and judgment, "say again that you did not abandon Jim Douglas to death. *And look Jim Douglas straight in the eyes as you say it!"*

The object McLaren held up—to face Red Grierson with its sightless eye-holes and fixed grin—was the missing skull.

CHAPTER XVIII

PLUTARCH PLAYS HIS HAND

THE effect upon Grierson of this climax to McLaren's challengings was terrific. A throaty, half-animal cry broke from his ashen lips. His face, ordinarily a violent red, took on the bluish shadows that indicate at least temporary suspension of the heart's action. His mouth opened and he sucked in air as if he were dying. He clawed at his neck, tearing the already open shirt away from his hairy breast. All at once his legs gave way under him. He sank on his knees, turning his face to the wall as he did so, and strange incoherent sounds came from his mouth.

Even McLaren, who had hoped to break the man and bring him to his knees, was awe-struck at the success of his great bluff, which had been based on nine parts deduction and one part guesswork.

For the moment he was at a loss what to do next. What to do with the man now that he had him, as he thought, down and out. At the same time he wondered what effect this scene was having upon Diana Hampton and her father. They had been strangely silent and he had not dared to remove his eyes from Grierson. But an occasional exclamation from Diana and, once, something which sounded like a satisfied chuckle from Hampton, told him that they were all right for the moment—fascinated, perhaps, by the drama being enacted.

Then, "Grierson," said McLaren in a less relentless tone, at the same time laying the skull on the table, "I'm going to call in a friend of mine who has been outside all along. He's the same I mentioned as having seen the smoke of the camp you made with Douglas over two years ago. He's the same who will turn loose that bunch of wild buckaroos if you offer any trouble. I'll let the law and the evidence decide what's to be done with you. But I can't afford to take chances with a man of your kind. So I'll have my friend in to tie you up, while I cover you so you won't make any row about it."

McLaren turned his head toward the shadows among the moonlit trees outside. He was about to call Plutarch when two things happened simultaneously.

There came a cry of warning from Diana Hampton. At the same time Grierson sprang up with a triumphant yell and faced McLaren. The little box, which he had discovered when he fell to his knees and turned his face to the wall, was overturned. On the ground beside it were a few greasy-looking sticks and some spilled sawdust.

In the red giant's uplifted hand as he stood there, an incarnation of mingled fear, malice, triumph and desperation, was one of the same sort of stick.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" he laughed insanely. "Now what yuh gonna do, mister? Sure I did all yuh say; sure I got rid of Douglas. Now I'm gonna get rid of you, by God! Drop that gun, mister? Get outa my way. I don't aim to throw this unless yuh drives me to it. All I wants is that rifle an' an even break. Then we'll see if yuh're so brash!"

McLaren did not lower the automatic which he had not replaced after Grierson's second attempt at the rifle.

He simply said, "I wouldn't make a move toward that rifle, Grierson, if I were you. I would also suggest that you put that dynamite back in the box—very carefully."

For the last time the effect of the superior man's calm was evident in the baffled expression of the inferior man's face. But then the rage of the slow-witted bull, which becomes violent as its only recourse when goaded, carried away the last restraining thread of Grierson's self-control. In that overwhelming access of insane fury with all the force of his mighty right arm, he hurled the stick of dynamite at McLaren.

The doctor was but human. Instinctively he ducked and leaped to one side. The dynamite stick missed him by about two feet, hurtled out through the open front of the cavern and violently collided with a rock among the trees. There came a heavy detonation, followed by thunderous echoes from the pinnacles of the range and

the crags of various spurs. The air became charged with acrid smoke and showering stones and fragments of rock.

"Plutarch!" broke from McLaren's lips as he involuntarily turned and looked where, or whereabouts, Pity-All should have been in hiding.

In that instant Grierson moved with a swiftness quite out of keeping with his bulk. He had made a dive for the rifle and—gained it.

Two shots came simultaneously. One seemed to come from the vicinity of Diana Hampton. Grierson's bullet, aimed at McLaren, grazed the doctor's head and flattened itself against the curving lip of overhanging rock. As McLaren staggered, slightly stunned for the moment, the red-haired outlaw dashed toward the open. McLaren, recovering, fired as the other disappeared. Whether his or Diana's shot had even touched the man they had no means of knowing.

He started after Grierson, his heart suffering a pang of misgiving as no shot outside told of Plutarch's living presence. But at the mouth of the cave McLaren was halted by a cry from Diana.

"Oh, doctor, quick! Dad!

FOR a second McLaren stood irresolute. Then the instinct engendered by training turned him back.

Culver Hampton was lying on the pallet with his head thrown far back. He was breathing quickly and convulsively. Instantly McLaren knew that the long-expected was at hand. He wished it might have been in another way at another time. But the excitement of the past two hours or more had been too much for the weakened man. McLaren felt some self-reproach, thinking that possibly he could have avoided or postponed the recent nerve-racking scene. But even as he was accusing himself Culver Hampton turned his head. Then the doctor knew that thing could not have worked out better for the doomed man.

There was a smile of utter satisfaction on Hampton's face as he whispered, "Fine, doctor! You got him good. You're a—real—he-man. I'm not afraid—of anything—now."

Half an hour later McLaren was standing with his hand on the head of a girl who was kneeling on the ground by the pallet. He just stood there in silence, but the strength of his healing sympathy flowed through that hand.

"Don't forget, Diana," he said, when the violence of her grief had somewhat abated, "don't forget to look on the other side of things. You've lost your dad, but as you said yourself only yesterday—it's for the best. And you've got rid of Grierson. He's gone—for good, I fancy. At least, he won't come back—for his own good."

But despite that he painted a brighter picture for the girl, McLaren's own heart was heavy. Again he felt that he had made a mess of things. Although he had forced a virtual admission of guilt from Grierson, he had let the man escape his deserts; had perhaps been responsible for hastening Hampton's end, and—this was what troubled him most—brought about that dynamite explosion, since which there had been no sign of Plutarch Cummins.

He wished to go out and look for his friend, or his remains. But he dared not leave the girl at this moment. Yet—Hampton must be buried. The girl must leave the mesa immediately thereafter, for it was unthinkable that she should continue here alone. Perhaps if he told her his fear for Plutarch she might rouse herself and help him in the search. Shifting another's trouble on a mind burdened with its own is often a helpful counterbalance of the load.

"Diana," he said, "I'm in a bit of trouble myself, and I want you—"

A step sounded in the cave-mouth. McLaren spun around, his automatic instantly covering the man who stood there dimly illumined by the moonlight outside and the light of the hurricane lamps within.

It was Pity-All Plutarch. But at first he was hardly recognizable. His sombrero was missing and there was a bandana kerchief knotted about his head. The visible part of his face was discolored, dirty and much cut and bruised. From his left temple blood was trickling down his neck.

His attitude was strange, too, curiously relaxed and limp. He seemed dazed, distracted, or puzzled. In his right hand drooped a .45 six-shooter, dangling by the trigger-guard hook on a single finger.

"Heaven pity all pore sailors—" he began in a muttering kind of way, then stopped as he saw what had happened in the cave.

"Thank God you're alive, Plutarch! What happened?" cried McLaren advancing rapidly upon the apparition.

Diana had looked up at the moment McLaren spun around. She saw Plutarch and—stranger though he was to her—perceived that he was injured.

"Oh! He's hurt!" she cried instantly forgetting her own sorrow and coming swiftly to Plutarch's side.

" 'Tain't nothin', ma'am," said he, staring at her beauty with a sudden recrudescence of interest in his surroundings. "Just scratches an' cuts from flyin' dirt. If anything big had hit me I wouldn't be here complainin'. But—Jumpin' Gingersnaps!" He broke off, again muttering. "That was pore shootin'—rotten shootin'!"

"What happened, Plute?" repeated McLaren, this time with the note of professional calm as he unwound the kerchief and found nothing more serious than that the foreman's scalp had been fairly raked with flying stone-chips. Of his own bullet-grazed head only a headache remained as a reminder.

"I see you jest goin' to give me the call," explained Pity-All. "I was comin' in anyhow, when that there red-top cuts loose with the fireworks. The dynamite hits a rock right near me. If it hadn't been I was pertected by the next rock, the which I was hidin' back of, I'd a' gone up in a blaze of glory. As it is, there's some mess. When I gets clear of it and wipes some of the dust outa my eyes, I sees this party—Grayson, yuh calls him?—hoofin' it down the trail we come in by.

"As it looks you has your hands full in here, I trails after this hombre, though I can scarce see straight, what with sand in my eyes and— Reckon I was maybe bleedin' a little.

"Well, he gains on me, owin' to my natural handicaps and his knowin' the way. But he gets held up when he comes to a sorta gorge over there to the west and begins tyin' up a kinda rope contrivance."

"The rope bridge. The way I got off the mesa the first few times, Plute," McLaren assisted.

"He has the bridge up an' is half-way over—straddlin' it an' hitchin' himself across—when he sees me comin' on behind. He draws a bead on me with his rifle—"

Pity-All suddenly stopped, glancing uneasily at Diana.

"Maybe the lady 'ud rather not hear what comes next."

"So long as he's not coming back, I can stand anything—now," said Diana in response to an inquiring glance from McLaren.

"He ain't comin' back, ma'am," said Plutarch quietly. "Well, it's like this. He misses me. Moonlight's mighty poor for shootin'. An' that woobly rope-bridge is a darn poor thing to steady on. But I resents his shootin' at me—which is a perfeck stranger to him—an' I takes a shot at him, the gent bein' a perfeck stranger to me, likewise.

"Rotten shootin', doc, rotten shootin'! I misses him as clean as he misses me. The sand in my eyes—an' I keeps wipin' 'em. Blamed if I coulda drawed a bead on a barn door. He ain't doin' no better. Bullets spatters all about, but that's about all, until—"

The dazed, distracted, puzzled look returned to Pity-All's face.

"I don't figger how it happens at first—not sure even yet. But as I takes another fool shot at this Grayson party, something happens to that rope contrivance. One side of it snaps and goes down sudden—one of the two ropes on the t'other side, I mean. This Grayson gent saves himself from topplin' down into the gorge by droppin' his rifle and grabbin' rope. I hears the gun go clatterin' away down a helluva ways an' sees him holdin' on—by one strap, as yuh might say. Looks like the bridge is dependin' on a single rope on the further side to hold it up an' across. This Grayson hombre is hangin' on by his hands an' tryin' to pull himself up so he can straddle again an' work over to the other side. He just about makes it. Gets one leg over, I mean, an' is hoistin' the other, when—well, he's no bantam nor featherweight, this Grayson; his tuggin' an' lurchin' to get up musta done the trick— The other fastenin' on t'other side pulls out. Down goes the whole further end and the big hombre with it. I reckon when the rope

contrivance comes up short on this side's fastenin', his grip's broke.

"An'—as I says, ma'am, he ain't ever comin' back," Pity-All concluded softly.

"Seems like an act of Providence!" muttered McLaren, while the girl turned away with a shiver and remained silent.

"Sure!" said Pity-All. "It works in curious ways. If I'd been able to see straight, no stray lead from my gun woulda cut that rope clean through. I pulls up the blame thing to look see an'—I figgers that's maybe just what happened!"

CHAPTER XIX

A QUESTION OF GUARDIANSHIP

McLAREN, Plutarch Cummins and Diana Hampton slept in the cave that night. The doctor was physically played out after thirty-six hours of almost continuous activity. Plutarch, making light of his cuts and bruises, elected to stay because there were a few things to be done which would necessitate an extra pair of hands. They slept together on the ground under a blanket recently the property of Red Grierson.

Diana slept in her tunnel recess "bedroom" after Dr. McLaren had induced her to take a dose of the light opiate he had bought in Pueblo for her late father's use.

In the morning everybody felt better. McLaren was quite refreshed. Pity-All was anxious to get things done so he could return to his ranch duties. Diana was quiet, but collected. She readily consented to her father's burial on the Mesa of Lions.

"He loved it," she said. "It was only Grierson."

So McLaren and Pity-All borrowed some of the mining implements and dug a grave. Dr. Ross McLaren said a little prayer—and stood bare-headed, with one arm about Diana's quivering body as Plutarch filled in.

Wisely leaving Diana to herself for a little while, suggesting that she "might like to pack up a few things to take out," the two men went to the spot where Grierson had buried the bones of Jim Douglas.

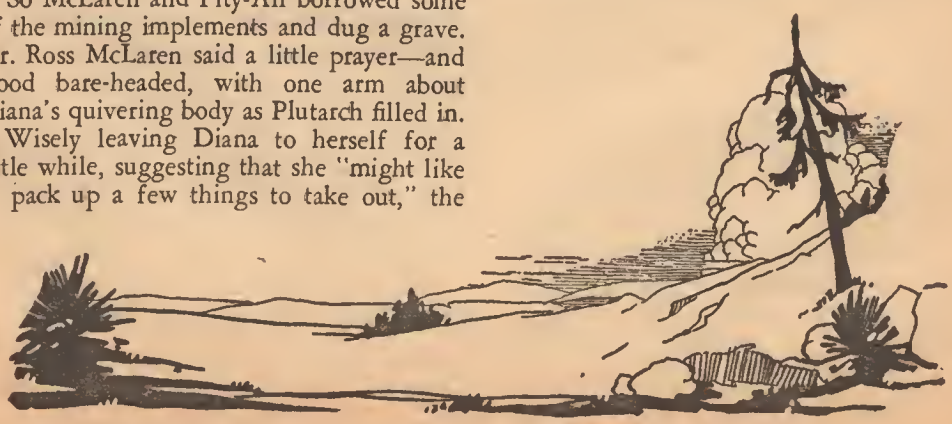
McLaren added the skull, also the stained and faded picture in a little leather case, and said as he replaced the slab, "I'll keep the ring. He may have relatives. In the meantime," he added, "it's a good thing that rope is at Slide Rock. We'd be in a pickle about getting Miss Hampton out without it."

Then, to give Diana more time to collect herself and her belongings, McLaren briefly told Pity-All the whole story.

THE Arrowhead bunch had been worried all morning about the mysterious disappearance overnight of Pity-All Plutarch. At dawn Shorty had discovered a couple of saddled ponies trailing their bridles outside the corral gate.

Later, about ten o'clock in the forenoon, the bunch were fairly pop-eyed with astonishment when the missing foreman, looking as if he had been wrestling with a cyclone, appeared on foot. He was accompanied by the "fool for fishin'," also looking much the worse for wear, and a beautiful girl whom none of them had ever seen before. She seemed to Shorty, and so he afterward described her, as "a cross between Minnehaha and a nimp."

While McLaren and Pity-All explained matters to Tom Brewster in the living-room, Ma Brewster broke her rule of never "horning in" on anything outside her domestic affairs. She took charge of Diana Hampton and put her to bed with a dish of hot gruel. Then, on the girl's further behalf Ma betook herself in Plutarch's "Desert



Cabbage" to Pueblo and a woman's dry-goods store.

So that, later in the afternoon of the same day, when McLaren asked to see Diana, meaning to tell her that his professional practice in San Diego was suffering by his absence, he was greeted by a quiet but smiling girl who, except for her sun-tanned skin, would have passed anywhere unnoticed save for her beauty.

But the girl's face fell when she heard that McLaren was going and that the proposition was to leave her at the ranch with Ma Brewster for a while.

"Oh!" she cried, greatly agitated. "Please, Ross—no! They're strangers—and so many of them, and—please take me with you. I'd go anywhere with you."

"You dear innocent!" said McLaren huskily, deeply moved. "But listen, Diana. I'm coming back over week-ends for the fishing. In the meantime, you've got to have some sort of guardian. Then, too, I have to see about this mine. Now that Grierson and Douglas are dead, and your dad—What I mean is, you own Grierson's share now. You own the whole mine!"

"I don't—and won't have Grierson's share!" she declared. "You should have it. You earned it."

"Oh, that wouldn't do at all," laughed McLaren. "But come to think of it, perhaps you even haven't a right to it—to all of it. First thing I do is to put an advertisement in some leading papers asking for the whereabout of the next of kin to James Douglas, who was last heard of—et cetera. If none turns up— Say, Diana," he broke off with sudden enthusiasm, "wouldn't it be great to have a decent camp on that mesa, where you and I and Bill Thayer—a friend of mine you'll meet later—could have fishing-parties, and where Plutarch and the bunch could camp for overnight lion-hunts?"

"And let the mine go!" she cried eagerly. "For, of course, that would be the end of the fishing and the lions—a big working mine."

"Ummm!" mused McLaren. "Well—we'll see about that. We might keep the mine secret until you maybe need the money.

"In the meantime," he went on, but stopped short with perplexity knitting his brows.

"Yes, Ross," she encouraged.

"About your staying here," he said slowly. "You don't have to, of course, but—Look here, Diana!" he blurted out rather desperately. "If you wouldn't think my mother such a stranger for a little while, until— She's in San Diego, you know, and gets pretty lonesome sometimes, I imagine, with me paying professional calls at all hours of the day and night. And after a bit—"

He was looking at her, wondering if it would be fair to tell her so soon. She had had no opportunity to compare him with other men. The girl met his gaze. Her eyes were filled with a light of simple devotion to the one man before her.

"Oh, hell!" she whispered, suddenly aware that she was going to burst out crying.

He just swept her into his arms. "You dear, dear innocent!" he cried, half laughing. "If you are going to use such language right along, I'll have to warn my mother in advance."

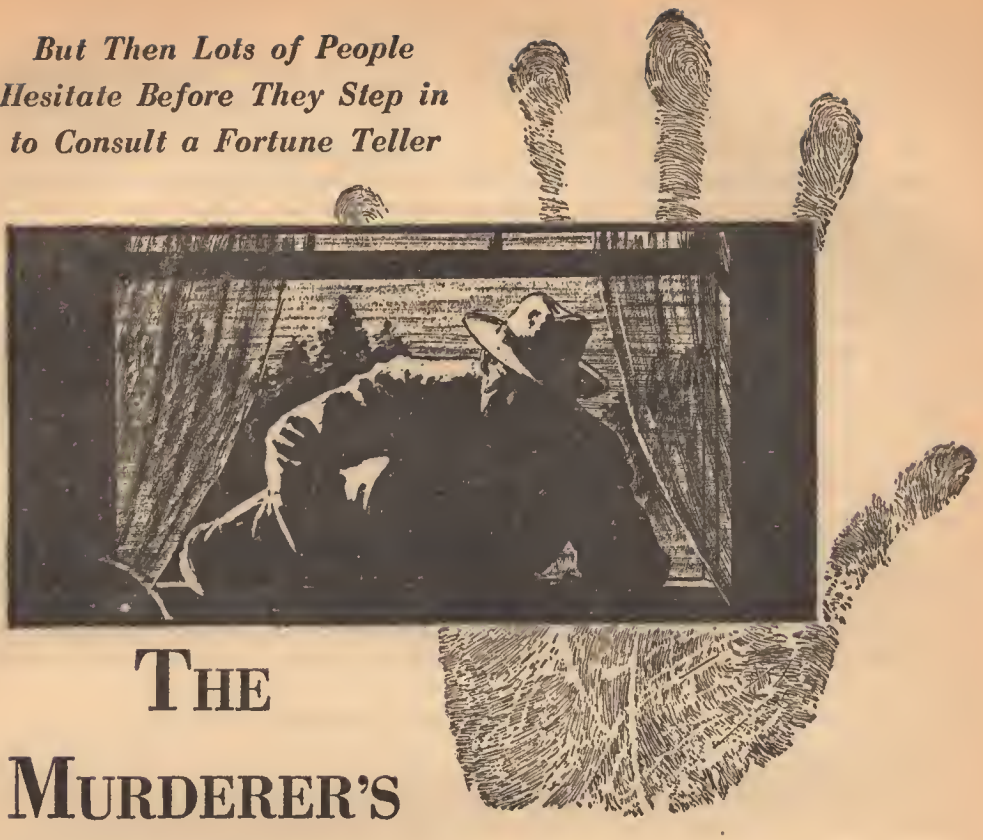
"Oh, I forgot!" she said, her face buried on his shoulder. "But please take me to her, Ross—your mother. I think, I think I'd rather see her than anybody on earth—except you!"

OVER in the bunkhouse Shorty was anxiously putting a momentous question to Pity-All Plutarch.

"Plute, does we have a leetle game this evenin'? Seems like we oughta sting the doc before he departs."

To which the foreman replied gravely, "Shorty, my conscience balks at this motion before the board. I refuses to play poker with young persons, drunk individul's, or such as is for any reason temporairy loco, or sufferin' from affections of the heart. He'd lay down a royal flush, thinkin' it was a bobtail straight, or play a mixed hand thinkin' it was all queens! There's a full moon this evenin', Shorty. As humans, sympathetic an' unnerstandin', it behooves us all to retire early an' remove our shadders, as yuh might say, from the landscape!"

But Then Lots of People Hesitate Before They Step in to Consult a Fortune Teller



THE MURDERER'S LEFT HAND

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

THE boss called me in and told me he was going to put me on the Harris case. He asked me if I'd read about it, and I said sure.

"Nasty business," I said. "The guy had a wife and four kids, too."

"He had a $70,000 policy with us for his wife's jewelry, which is more to the point," the hard-hearted boss said, "and that was the stuff the murderer got away with. We're watching every place we know, but I don't suppose any of it's likely to show up." He tilted back in his chair. "I was out to the Harris house, in Jersey. The local cops don't amount to much, and if anybody's going to get that ice back, and incidentally get the murderer, I guess it's up to us. We'll watch things here. I mean, we'll watch the fences and layers and all like that. You're going to be out in the field.

"Here's the way it was. In the first place, it was a second-story job and whoever did it is no slouch! The bedroom windows don't face out on the roof of the porch climbed, and the window he did break in was locked, and had a heavy screen over it, and was protected by a Fink alarm system besides. He went past that Fink as if it was a cobweb! Mrs. Harris says the first thing she knew was when she woke up and heard her husband running out of the room. He's always a light sleeper, she says, and that particular night he wasn't feeling well. That must account for how he happened to hear this guy working. Because the jewelry had already been taken by that time.

"Well, she yelled out what's the matter, and her husband yelled back something about a burglar, and she heard him run downstairs. He must have got between the crook and the window, so's the crook had to find another way out. Mrs. Harris heard the side door thrown open, and then slammed shut, and then thrown open again. She started to scream. The two servants came downstairs, and after a while the three of them went down to the side door and outside—and there they found Harris. He was lying on the walk there right next to a brand new flower bed, and his lower jaw had been socked so hard that it had splintered off and part of it had been driven up through his brain."

"That," I murmured, "must have been some poke."

"It was," said the boss. "It's pretty hard to think of anybody being strong enough to crack a man's jaw like that, unless he had a sledge hammer. But in this case there's every reason to believe that he did it with his fist. Or maybe brass knuckles.

"There's no fingerprints anywhere, but in the flower garden there's the mark of a hand. The guy evidently swung himself right off his own balance when he pasted poor old Harris. That's what it looked like to me, anyway. He landed with his knees on the walk, probably, and certainly with the heel of his left hand in the soft earth. It didn't leave any marks for the ends of his fingers, because they didn't go in deep enough, but it left the palm as clear as you could ask for. The earth was very fine and just damp enough to be right. I poured plasticina into it, and made a cast."

He produced a picture about eight by ten. It was a black and white, and looked like a huge pen drawing of a man's palm covered with thin lines.

"I had an expert working on this all night, enlarging it three diameters and doing what they call 'interpreting' it. Now you know as well as I do that any man's palm is just as distinctive as his fingerprints —only of course it's never on file anywhere. I don't mean the wrinkles the fortune-tellers use! I mean the ridges that are there just like the ridges on a bulb, that the average person never even notices. This thing's all worked out for you, on the back here. It's got the code classification and everything. In case you're interested, it's ten, little 'd' nine, six, five, big 'C', all over twenty-six. So there you are." He scaled the picture across the desk. "All you got to do now is find the guy who has that left hand."

"Oh, is that all?"

"That's all," he said. "And don't be too long about it!"

WELL, in this business you never know what's going to happen next. I went out, carrying the picture, and went to the Public Library. I'd served three years in the cops, a year and a half of that in the Identification Bureau, and I know something about fingerprints; but palmistry was a new one on me. So I read everything on the subject I could get—books and magazine articles by Wilder, and Kidd, and Desbarolles, and Whipple, and Heron-Allen, and a few others whose names I forget. Some of them were scientific works, and some were nothing but.

Then I went to the newspaper file room and started looking over all the newspapers for the past four days. I figured that just having pulled a murder, and being in possession of some hot ice he wouldn't dare to shove at present, the crook would go somewhere else for his next job. So I looked over up-state papers mostly; and at last, in the Willis *Times*, I found what I was after.

A second story man, just the previous night, had lifted jewelry worth $70,000 from a home in West Willis, which is a suburb of Willis, and from the account in the paper the guy worked just the same as the guy in the Harris case.

So I went to Willis.

Before I went I bought a lot of stuff in a circus-carnival outfitters. And all the way there on the train I studied that enlargement of the murderer's hand. I studied it until I could close my eyes and see every single delta and island and end in its relation to every other end and island and delta. If I didn't know anything else, when I got to Willis, I certainly knew that palm!

For a guy who's Irish on both sides, I did pretty well by myself in the crazy cracked mirror in back of the store I rented. Dark brown grease paint and black eyebrow pencil and some black crepe hair and spirit gum—then brass rings in the ears, and some

giddy green and purple silk wound around the head for a turban and held in place by a flock of Woolworth's glassware — and finally a long robe of green cheesecloth with a cheap red silk sash. Boy, I was hot stuff!

"Abdullah Ahmeer Sees Into The Future" said my sign, while I stayed behind it and wondered what was going to happen next. Maybe I didn't look like a real East Indian, or whatever it was I was supposed to be, but what guy in that business does?

Besides the sign, I had in the window my second best crystal ball—the good one I kept in the back room for business purposes —and a lot of tiny gilded figures of crabs and scorpions and things like that, that I'd rented along with the other junk. I covered this window with yellow cloth; I stuck up some other odds and ends; and then I sat down and waited for people to come.

THE first person to arrive was a cop. They might have a lousy force in Willis when it comes to catching crooks, but in some things they're very prompt. This particular cop stared at me in disgust for a minute, shaking his head. I showed my teeth in what I considered to be a first class Mohammedan smile, or maybe it was Hindu, and invited him in to have his future revealed. I told him it was free for members of the police department. He only gave me another disgusted look, and turned and walked away. Fifteen minutes later I had a second visitor.

This guy said his name was Monkhouse and that he was a police sergeant. He showed me a badge. He could have saved himself that trouble. There was cop written all over him. He might just as well have been in uniform.

"Will you," I asked, making a swell salaam, "have your future revealed, yes? Meester Mong-house?"

He was a big guy, and nasty-tempered. He stood there with his fists on his hips, glaring at me. After a while—and he came like an explosion—he barked:

"You got no right here! We got an ordinance against fortune telling!"

"But I do not tell fortunes, Meester Mong-house! I reveal the future! It ees all—what you say?—scientific."

"Yeah, I'll bet it is! You don't have to talk that way if it's hard on you," Monkhouse said. "I suppose your real name is Hank Brown?"

"My real name," I said with, I hope, a certain dignity, "is Charles Francis Xavier Morrissey. Won't you step into the back-room, Sarge, and maybe we can talk about me getting a permit or something?"

Well, he took ten dollars. I thought that fairly light—until he came around the next day and took another ten. Then he skipped a day, but on the fourth day he demanded fifteen. And he got it. I was anxious not to let him know who I really was, because I didn't trust this police department worth a damn; I knew from all I'd heard of it that it probably leaked like a sieve, and I didn't want the underworld around here to get wise to the fact that there was an insurance dick in town. They don't like insurance dicks, and I don't blame them. The insurance companies are too persistent, and too willing to spend money.

So I paid the tariff and kept my mouth shut. Monkhouse never cracked a smile all the time. I don't think he liked me much. Which was just the way I felt about him.

Well, business wasn't bad, though I was handing out more than I took in. It wasn't a tough life, really, and yet it isn't exactly a profession I'd recommend to a youngster trying to dope out what to do for a career. Certainly not in Willis.

Naturally I read the newspapers. And on the third day there was another job pulled in West Willis which set my mind at rest about the Harris killer still being in our midst. It was another very neat second story job. The crook got some petty cash and jewelry valued at about $11,000. He had pried open a narrow closed window without making a sound and without leaving any marks that amounted to anything.

So I went on peering into the future at two bits the peer, and filling in the dull evening with long silent studies of that picture the boss had given me.

I had seen a lot of palms already, but I hadn't seen the one I was looking for.

On the sixth day I was sitting in the shop, looking through a crack in the curtain. It was the middle of the afternoon, and warm. I felt warmer still, in the outfit I had on. The grease paint had begun to show beads of perspiration, so I'd gone in back and wiped it a little thinner and then covered it with a fine brown powder. That helped.

I could see the sidewalk through the crack in the yellow curtain, and I used to sit there and watch people outside trying to make up their minds to come in. Lots of people hesitate for a long while before they step in to consult a fortune teller. It used to give me a kick to sit and watch them, whether they finally came in or not.

Well, this afternoon, along around four o'clock, a little rat of a guy in a brown suit drifted past, looking at my sign out of the corner of one eye. He was interested, I could see that; but he was a sharp, suspicious little fellow, and he wasn't going to do anything in too much of a hurry. A little while later he drifted past again, still staring sideways at that sign. He looked ignorant but not dumb—if you know what I mean. He was skinny rather than flashy. His face was thin and almost white. He smoked a cigarette as though he was sore at it.

After a while he came drifting along the third time, and this time I knew he was going to come in. And he did.

He popped in suddenly, as if he was afraid somebody would hit him with something if he stayed out there on the sidewalk any longer. I made my best salaam, and he stood staring at me for a long time, while the smoke from his cigarette rose straight to the brim of his felt, breaking there into thick lazy whorls.

At last he said, "You tell fortunes, Professor?"

"I gaze," I said, "into the future."

"With cards, or by looking at a guy's hand, or what?"

"There are many ways," I said, "by which the initiated can gaze into the future. I am an adept. I know them all and practice all of them. You are troubled about something, Meester?"

He took the cigarette out of his mouth. Otherwise he didn't stir. He kept looking hard at me.

"Hell, no! I'm not in any trouble! What makes you think that?"

"You weesh I should tell you what the future holds for you?"

"How much does it cost?"

"The cost? It ees nothing!" I waved my arms. It made an impressive gesture with the green cheesecloth flapping back and forth; I'd practiced it carefully. "You geeve what you weesh."

"Well, a quarter is about what I'm going to weesh," he said.

I made him another salaam. I invited him to step into the back room, and when he did so I pressed close behind him, pretending to hold the curtain back for him. Well, I learned what I'd half expected to learn. The man had a gun on his right hip, under the coat.

The crystal ball, the good one, was there in the middle of a kitchen table covered with silver-fringed black plush. There was a deck of cards on the table too. I used to play solitaire when things were slow.

We sat at the table, and I stared into the crystal for a long time, seeing nothing in particular but looking very wise. The little guy stared too. He was a nasty little rat; but I knew that, for all his hard-boiled mannerisms, he was superstitious as hell.

I asked for his hands, and he gave them to me. I placed them palms-down upon the crystal ball, and put my own hands over them.

"Hey," he cried, starting to pull back.

"We must be quiet," I whispered. "The heat of your body must go into the ball, through your hands. Quiet!"

A minute or two later I took his hands away, carefully, and I stared into the crystal. He stared too. If I'd told him something was there he probably would have seen it; but instead I shook my head.

"It is not ready to reveal," I sighed. "We must try another means. We must take this antagonistic influence from our presence."

I carried the ball out to the front, holding it in front of me and stalking as majestically as a butler in the movies. But the instant I got out of the little guy's sight I put the ball on a chair, brought out my camel's-hair brush and some saffron powder, and began a thorough dusting.

The palm wasn't the one I was looking for. I hadn't really expected that it would be. This little squirt couldn't have busted a cat's jaw, even with a club. But I had a strong hunch that he was some kind of criminal, partly because of his general appearance, and the way he acted, and partly because of that gun he carried. So I'd been careful to place his hands upon the ball with the fingers spread, and as I'd held them there I'd rocked them a little, rolled them,

so that now, when the dusting job was finished, I had a perfect set of fingerprints.

For a moment I considered sending the whole crystal ball to Willis police headquarters; but right away I ditched that notion. It would require too much explaining. And anyway, the little guy, if he was a wanted criminal, certainly wouldn't be hanging around a town where they had his prints on file.

I don't honestly know why I was interested in this runt. Just common ordinary curiosity, I suppose. Things had been pretty quiet.

Washington might know him. They have the biggest fingerprint filing system in the world at Washington—more than four times as big as the one at Scotland Yard—and the best service in the world, too.

At any hour of the day or night they'll look up a set of prints for you, and snap an answer back. So just on the off-chance. I jotted down this guy's classification, wrote "rush," and signed my right name, giving the address of this store. I went to the front door.

I was lucky. I just happened to catch a Western Union boy going past. Then I went back to my customer.

HE WAS worried about something, but it wasn't me. He was nervous. But he was lonesome, and eager to talk to somebody and to hear somebody talking to him.

This little guy thought he was perfectly safe here in Abdullah Ahmeer's prophecy emporium, and he was in no hurry to get back on the sidewalk; he was going to get his quarter's worth.

Well, I read cards, very slowly and in deep accents. I examined his palms, nodding wisely. I handed him the same line of crap any other fortune teller would have handed him, no better and no worse; he ate it up. I could tell he had listened to all this stuff before, but once they have the habit they just can't get enough of it.

I strung the thing out as long as I could, which was almost an hour. The place was very quiet. Even when I'd finished, not being able to think of anything else to say, the little guy wasn't in any hurry to go. He paid me the quarter, but he lingered, not even getting out of his chair.

"Must be a pretty soft racket you got here at that, Professor," he said, and looked around. "Certainly don't cost you anything for the layout, and I suppose you take in quite a lot of jack?"

"Mere money," I lied loftily, "means nothing to me."

"Yeah?" He didn't believe that. He wouldn't have believed it of anybody. He picked up the cards, carelessly. "How'd you do that, Professor, when you laid them out just a little while ago?"

I demonstrated the arrangement of the cards. It was one I'd just made up as I went along, and I don't know whether I got it right the second time, but if I didn't he didn't notice the difference.

"They come together in suit runs or of a kind, huh? Like a poker hand, sort of. Or rummy. I don't suppose you even know what rummy is, Professor?"

I gave him the teeth.

"Ah, yes," I said condescendingly. "I have learned many of your Occidental habits since I've been here. Rummy I know, yes."

"That so? You wouldn't care to play a few hands for that quarter I just gave you, I don't suppose?"

This was swell! I shrugged amiably, still giving him the teeth, and said:

"But it would not be fair. I would take all that you have."

"Oh, yeah? You think you're pretty good, huh?"

After that it was easy. He wasn't a bad rummy player. At a nickel a point I was only about a dollar eighty to the good, an hour later, when the front door slammed open and somebody yelled: "Hey!"

The little fellow jumped about a foot. He was sore about being behind, and anxious to get back at me; but at the same time, he didn't like strange voices yelling "Hey!" I soothed him. It was only a customer, I told him. I said I would return in just a moment. I went out front.

Sergeant Monkhouse had something a lot more important on his mind than a petty shakedown. He was sore.

"Say, what the hell are you trying to pull in this town, anyway?"

"I do not understand you, Meester. I have not—"

"Never mind the Egyptian stuff, Morrissey! I want to know—" he was hauling a

telegram out of his pocket—"is what right you got to be sending a query to Washington about some guy's prints when you're only supposed to be a lousy fortune-teller here?"

Monkhouse's whisper would have been a shout, and he wasn't trying to whisper. I guessed right away what had happened. The Bureau of Investigation at Washington, being used to sending answers like this to different police headquarters throughout the country, had done that absent-mindedly with mine. And Monkhouse had got his hands on it.

I TRIED to shut the sergeant up, but he was a bull-headed fool, and sore as hell. I grabbed the telegram, got one good look at it. There was plenty! Harry Westerman, alias West, alias Waterman, alias Hawks, alias a few other things, was wanted in New York City on two larceny charges, in Columbus, Ohio, on a charge of breaking and entering, in Miami on a charge of burglary, in St. Louis—

That was as far as I could read. Monkhouse, the damned fool, started to haul me toward the door.

"What you're going to do is come right down with me and tell me what this's all about. And don't try to say that you didn't send any such wire, because I checked up with Western Union!"

I wrenched away from him and raced into the back room. Harry Westerman, alias West, alias Waterman, etc., etc., was not there. A window was open. A window with a rusty lock—But I hadn't heard a sound.

I went through that window as Monkhouse, pulling his gun and yelling blue murder, charged into the back room. I ran up an alleyway. Westerman was a brown streak at the other end—I caught just a blurred glimpse of him as he whisked around the corner.

At the mouth of the alleyway, going full speed, I rammed into a woman as tall as I am and much heavier. Three men like me probably wouldn't have knocked her out of the way, but I must have given her an awful jolt.

There was no time for apologies. I started to slip around this female mountain, but she grabbed me by the arm.

"See here, young man! Where do you think you're going?"

I don't think I ever saw an uglier woman. She had three large moles, with a stiff black hair growing out of the center of each. Her mouth was enormous. Her eyebrows were thick and black.

"Sorry," I muttered, and swung loose from her.

But she grabbed me again.

"I ought to have you arrested! Bumping into a woman like that!"

Then, before I knew what was happening, she hauled off and smacked me on the right cheek with her open hand. It made a sound like a paper bag that you blow up and then bust. And boy, it felt like a pile driver! I've taken socks right on the point of the chin that didn't hurt me half as much as that slap. Absolutely, it knocked me dizzy for a second there! And before I could clear my head, and start after the disappearing figure in brown, Sergeant Monkhouse had caught up with me.

I YELLED at him, I swore at him, I begged and entreated him. People began to gather, and Monkhouse was too dumb and too sore to understand what I was talking about. With people around he had to pose as a very tough guy. He shook me, and bellowed at me.

I was wild! But there was no getting away from that guy—short of pulling my gun and crowning him over the head with it. And I didn't think I ought to go that far, though it would have been a pleasure.

Eventually he began to get a notion of what it was all about. But by that time, of course, Harry Westerman, alias West, alias Waterman, alias Hawks, and all the rest of it, was far, far away. Monkhouse did his best, such as it was, once he got the idea. He hauled me into a drugstore and held me there while he made a telephone call to headquarters to turn in a general alarm. What he seemed most concerned with was that he should get a share of the credit, because he evidently figured that there might be a reward somewhere for this Westerman guy, and he didn't like the idea of splitting it; that was why he'd come to my place alone, instead of bringing another cop or two with him, as he should have done.

After the phone call he dragged me back to my own place and there he examined my credentials. He seemed to feel pretty sorry that he couldn't think of any charge to bring against me.

"I got half a mind to take you down and book you as a disorderly person anyway," he grumbled.

"I wish you would, Sergeant. Just let my name get on that blotter, as a disorderly person or anything else, and I'll have one grand time sitting around watching you climb back into a uniform where you belong!"

He said "Yeah?" and charged out. He hadn't forgotten about Westerman and the possibility of a reward. He probably figured that there was still a chance. He couldn't be bothered with me.

Well, I went to the back room, where I had my mirror. My head was still singing from the shock of that terrific slap, and I felt positively sick with disgust. My whole careful set-up was ruined now. But I had to do something, to keep myself from biting pieces out of the furniture in sheer fury, so I decided to clean off that damned grease paint which had been making my face so hot.

I stared at myself in the mirror. Then I stuck my head closer, and stared at myself harder, as if I'd never seen myself before.

Then I whirled around and went out of that place as fast as I could go.

The sidewalk still was crowded with people asking one another what had happened. I tore through them like a cyclone. The last I had seen of her, when Monkhouse was dragging me into that drugstore, she'd been going west toward the river, I went west.

There weren't any trolley cars there, and I guess she couldn't find a taxi. Or maybe she was too wise to seem to be hurrying. I caught sight of her waddling around a corner into Third Street. You couldn't miss her. She must have weighed more than 250 pounds.

When I reached that corner she was down near the middle of the block. She was turning into a rickety red brick house. There were seven or eight steps, and about half way up she seemed to sense me coming. She turned and saw me. She started to run.

There wasn't any time to call a cop. For all I knew there might be a back door to this house. I went up the steps in two jumps, and I was yanking out my gun as I plunged through the doorway.

Well, I was a little too anxious that time. As I leaped into the dim hall, the thing that had cracked old man Harris' jawbone caught me flush over the right ear, and I went spinning around while funny lights, most of them red, did funny dances for me. The lights broke up into streamers, which whirled in tight little circles very fast, and then exploded all at once. I hit a wall and went flat.

He was on top of me right away. For it was a man, of course. The woman never lived who could punch like that.

He kicked my gun arm, hard. The gun flew out of my hand and went scudding across the floor toward the back of the hall. Then he kicked me twice in the face. Then he ran for the stairs.

SOMEHOW those kicks in the face actually seemed to clear my head. The guy's skirt didn't help him any, and he had only reached the fifth or sixth step when I caught his feet from behind. He went sideways, the rotten banister rail cracking like matchwood. He hit the hall floor with a thump that shook the whole house. We got up.

Well, we could hardly see one another in that place, but it didn't stop us from throwing punches. I wouldn't call it a scientific bout. We just stood there toe-to-toe and swung with everything we had. I took plenty, but I was lucky that he never landed one square on my button. And his body was soft. Slapping him in the jaw probably would have been like slapping the side of the Empire State Building, but the body blows slowed him up. I got one beauty right in the breadbasket, and he doubled with an "oof!" As he did that I shifted and brought my first one up to his chin. It straightened him with a jerk, and his head went back. His head hit the end of one of the steps. The fight was over.

At least, that fight was over! Because before I had a chance to spit out the teeth that were floating around in the blood in my mouth, the whole damned house seemed to explode.

Harry Westerman, alias West, alias Waterman, and so-forth, was scampering

down the stairs like a scared rabbit. Only rabbits don't shoot automatics, the way he was doing. He was wild with excitement and fear; he was panicky. Which was a break for me. Though at that, one slug stung the top of my left ear as I threw myself to the floor and started to roll.

Westerman reached the front door and threw it open, and swung around for another crack at me. That just goes to show how crazy the guy was. If he hadn't done that he might have got away, because I was dizzy and badly banged up and in no condition to give anybody much of a chase. But when he turned he gave me time to get my gun from the floor. He was perfectly silhouetted there in the open doorway. I shot him twice. I couldn't have missed if I'd tried.

He went right over backward, and before the door swung shut again I glimpsed him sliding toward the sidewalk on one shoulder and one hip. He messed the steps up something terrible.

Me? I just rolled over on my back and sort of went to sleep. I'd had plenty.

"NOT a bad job," the boss said. "This Westerman had a record a mile long, and this guy Kuttinech had one a mile and a half, I guess. Funny kind of a female impersonator, wasn't he?"

"Yeth," I said, because I hadn't had a chance to get pivot teeth put in yet, "funny athe hell."

"The cops say he used to pull that act around here, a couple of years ago. Used to wait in women's rooms in the subway, and when women came in he'd give them the arm and grab their bags. Nice guy."

"Yeth," I said, "very nithe guy."

"But of course he made a swell moll for Westerman, who never did trust real women. He was a gun carrier and a scene tosser and a lookout and a sort of bodyguard all rolled in one. Westerman always was afraid he'd be held up. He used to carry a lot of hot ice around with him. Thank God he still had that Harris stuff! He was a big-timer, Westerman. But he spoiled his career when he took an assistant who cracked men's jaws. Alone, he might have got away from Harris. But that pet gorilla of his thought he ought to earn his keep by handing out a haymaker. Funny thing about him—the cops tell me he really did look like a woman, after all. Sounded like one too. How'd you happen to spot him?"

I pointed to my right cheek. I wasn't talking any more than I had to, because it hurt to talk.

"He thlapped me."

"He slapped you? Well, you look as though he'd done it with an anvil or something!"

"He thlapped me with hith open hand. My cheek wath gweathy."

"Oh, I get it!" The boss chuckled. "He left his palm print on your make-up, eh?" He chuckled some more. Not having my head, he seemed to think it was all very funny. He started to look over my expense sheet, which was clipped to the report. "What's this ten and ten and fifteen? You've just got them marked 'G'. What's that stand for?"

"Gwavey, aw gweath, aw gwaft. Copth. Thake-down."

"Oh, that's it! Well, I see you took in twenty-nine dollars, so the company isn't out so much after all. That's pretty good dough for a beginner. Fortune telling must be an easy job. Maybe I'll go in for it, some day when I'm tired of catching crooks."

"You can have it," I said, limping out. "Thee if I care!"

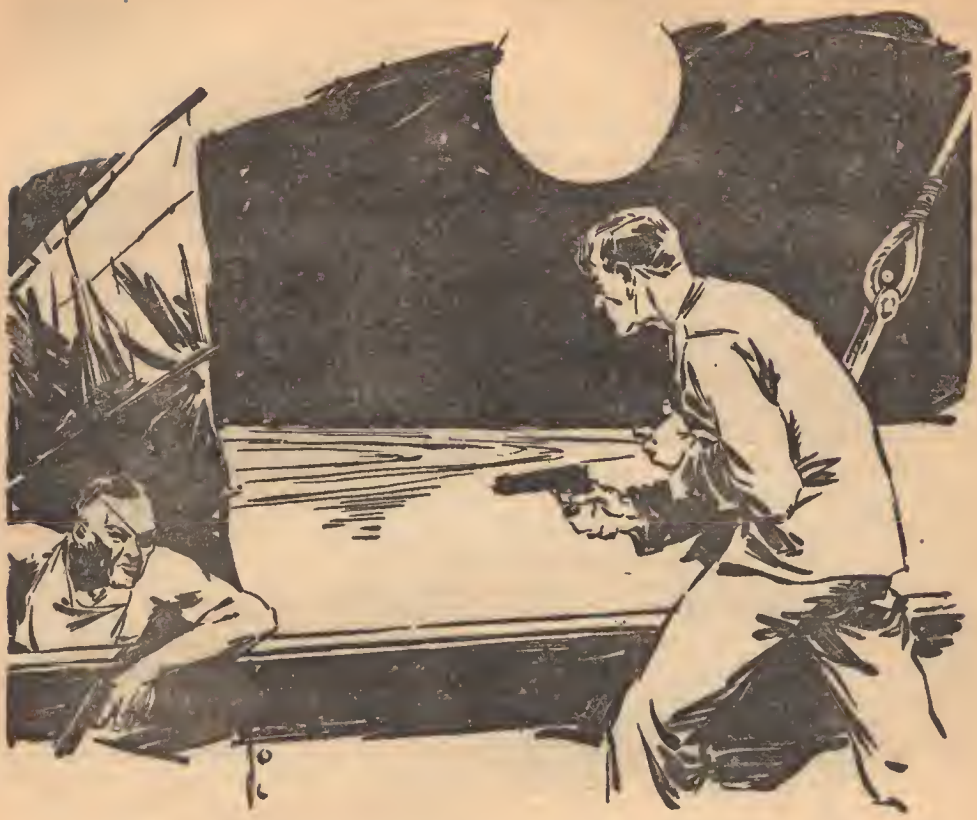
In the next SHORT STORIES

A mystery of the East clamps down on the West

7 Blue Diamonds of Baroda

CHARLES B. STILSON

And a White Man Takes the Sacred Stones.



THE STONES OF CHANG

By J. ALLAN DUNN

THE island lay silent and sinister beneath the sun. The trade wind moved in the mangroves, the pandanus and coco-palms of the beach, ruffled the slopes of yellow cogon grass and bowed the tops of the forest trees that marched up to the base of fantastic, fire-gored pinnacles.

Bristol, owner-master of the *Sea Swallow,* kept her off and on, ready to pick up his shoreboats and get away.

He was on deck, burning with island-fever, dizzy with quinine; watching the horizon for the first sign of returning war-canoes. Barbed-wire was strung on rail stanchions, rifles laid out on the cabin skylight.

This was the isle of Serak, in the Banda Sea, remote and of evil reputation. The little kingdom of Chang, the Enchanter; the hybrid progeny of Mongol pirate and Malay princess; ruthless, crafty and strong.

Badly as they needed water, Bristol would not have risked his men ashore if the beach-tribe had not assured him Chang was absent; Chang was raiding for heads, manmeat, living captives.

The beach-men had been placated with gifts of dog-biscuit, cans of salmon, lengths of gaudy trade-cotton. They were

treacherous but not badly to be feared. Walters, the mate, had a covering-boat in the lagoon. The other boat had gone up the creek to get pure water.

Eyes had watched the coming of the barkentine from the bamboo watchtowers of Chang's jungle capital; were watching now. Only the absence of Chang kept the bushmen inactive.

A weft was on a whip, the small cannon forward was loaded, ready to recall the men at the first hint of Chang's great lug-sail of matting on the sharp line of purple that marked the horizon. Or at the first sign of failing wind.

TAU, half-brother of Chang, squatted on a low, obscenely carven stool on the sing-sing ground of the bush capital. From the boughs of the sacred banian strings of skulls swung slowly in the breeze. More skulls were stacked in pyramids. The spirit-house held hundreds of them. They pronounced the might of Chang.

Tau was doing something he would not have dared in Chang's presence. Casting the Sacred Stones in divination.

Tau aspired to wizardry, though he was only Chang's assistant. He wanted to make a coup that even Chang would approve, that would strengthen his own position, but he was irresolute. Failure might mean his death. The stones should decide.

They were smooth pebbles of varying size and shape, looking not unlike hardened oozing of tree gum. He rattled them in a calabash, tossed them, observed the pattern in which they fell on the dirt, packed like cement by generations of stamping footsoles, hard as horn. They made an almost perfect circle, the largest stone in the center. It gave out a dull gleam as it rolled into position.

Tau got to his feet, stark-naked, striped and spotted with white and red and black pigment. His charms clicked; fingerbones strung on sinnet, a necklet of human teeth, the mummied head of an unborn babe bobbing on his chest. His eyes glittered and his filed teeth gleamed like those of a hungry dog.

"Seize the men ashore," he ordered. "Bring them alive. Sound the signal drums."

Trumpeters boo'd his commands through the great shells. The signalers moved towards the drums. These were not the great devil-drums, hollow logs slit to make a sounding-board and stood on end, carved with the face of a demon, inset with shell eyes; long, scarlet tongues lolling out of sharks' teeth; beaten to incite blood-fury.

These were different. Sending-tympani. Each identical with the great bowl of polished toa, set on the deck platform that united the twin bulls of Chang's war-catamaran.

All were nearly filled with water, set to a precise mark.

They tapped them with padded sticks. The water quivered, the drums droned, the rhythm shifting in barbaric code. Those vibrations could carry far, be repeated on Chang's drums. Chang should be on his way back, with eighty paddles flashing, two abreast, forty men in each canoe hull, surging along, with the great sail set to speed their progress. Those paddles would flash faster when the message reached the Enchanter.

THE men in the covering boat were drowsy. Walters fought off sleep, induced by the heat, the sultry sough of the wind, the monotony of surf on the reef, the incessant buzz of insects, the drifting flight of enormous, azure butterflies; the dazzle of the sun on the quiet lagoon.

The lagoon was hued like the tail of a peacock. Beyond the creaming reef the sea was cobalt. On the coral dust of the beach a lace of surf lipped the strand and melted into it with a light seething, like the hiss of champagne.

"They're tyking their ruddy time," said Henderson, the supercargo. "I don't 'ear 'em no more."

"You wouldn't, account of the fall," said Walters. "Keep your eyes peeled. Ipanu's a good man," he added, as if he wanted to banish some lurking fear of his own. The beach-natives had all disappeared.

"You gotta be more than just a good man, when those beggars drop down on you outa trees, like bloody chimpanzees," persisted Henderson. He was an old hand in island trade.

Ipanu, Walters reflected, would keep a lookout, hurry the work. Arab and Malay blent in him. He was upright as a spear, tough and supple as rattan. His hair stood pompadour above his saddle-colored face. He had the arched nose of a warrior, his eyes slanted slightly, wide apart. There were scars of battle as well as tribal weals on his body above his striped sarong. The plaited thong of hibiscus fiber about his muscular throat had small turkshead knots in it, each knot a life, taken in fair fight.

All about the waterfall, making a cool, green twilight, the bush was thick as wattle. Hand on the sharkskin hilt of his kris, Ipanu heard the drums and the insolent booing of the conches. All the casks were filled but one. Purvis, the ship's cooper, tinkered at its hoops.

Ipanu gave an order. Purvis and Marlowe were white, the others Papuans. Ipanu was in command, from sheer merit.

THE glossy leaves of a great fig trembled. Savages dropped from it like ripe apples from shaken boughs. Marlowe, the cook, who had come along to get fresh fruit, bolted; splashing through to the beach and fell, knee-deep, an arrow shafted home between his shoulder-blades. He pitched forward, scrabbling on all-fours in the shallows that were streaked pink with his blood. He got up and staggered down stream, arrows pluming all about him.

Ipanu fought like a panther. His kris bit deep before he went down, maced from behind by a club of ironwood. The conches booed and blared in higher notes, triumphal echoes to the howls of the tribesmen.

"Give way!" yelled Walters in the covering boat. "Snap into it!"

The stout staves bowed as the blades lashed the water. The mate steered straight for the entrance to the stream. Marlowe came bolting out of the mangroves, struck a patch of coral grit and came down it clumsily, ankle deep, his legs buckling. Back of him, leaping like apes over the hooping mangrove roots, tribesmen showed like shadows, vanishing as bullets answered their arrows.

They hauled Marlowe over the gunwale where shafts were quivering. He was done for, smeared with blood, his shirt sodden, dyed scarlet.

"They got the rest," he gurgled through the red foam on his lips.

The recall gun barked from the *Sea Swallow,* the weft whipped in the breeze. They shoved off, backed water. Warriors showed on the beach, jigging and shuffling, jeering; difficult targets. Beyond arrow flight, Walters called for backed oars, gave them a volley.

One man dropped. The rest dived back into the bush.

"They'll have their bloody canoes out in a jiffy," said Henderson. "They'd come damn' nigh catchin' us before we make the ship. Better get aboard, mister. Ere's poor Marlowe scragged and the rest booked for the ovens. They'll 'ave 'acked their 'eads off by now."

"I doubt it," said Walters. "Not with Chang away. We'll put it up to the Old Man. I know one thing, he won't take it lying down."

THE sun dropped behind the forest. The western sky flamed but the fire was fading. The tropic night was poised on the crags that still held an incandescent glow but the sing-sing ground was flooded with purple shadow.

It was the heart of Chang's citadel, which was walled with coral slabs. There was an inner palisade of stakes, sharpened and hardened in the fire. They pointed slightly outwards. The one great gate was guarded by an overhead stabbing-platform.

Ipanu had been honored by being swung from a root bough of the sacred banian in a rattan cage. The rest were trussed like fowls for market, huddled beneath him.

Tau had made no mistake about the quality of Ipanu, even while he still lay insensible and Tau listened to the story of the men who had taken him, considered their wounds.

Here was a man. To eat his heart would transfer mana to the devourer. His eyes would give wisdom, his liver cunning. Chang would probably claim these tidbits, but Tau might first boil the heart to make a weak broth; which was his, as captor.

He had told Ipanu these things when Ipanu revived, and he saw that the mana of Ipanu was mighty. There was a fearless serenity about the Malay that shriveled Tau's ego.

Ipanu had understood him, but Tau could not understand what Ipanu said to his fellow captives. It did not matter much.

Tau had heard from Chang. In the spirit-house, where the receiving bowl was set upon a slab of stone, the water had been fairly wrinkled, the calabash gave off faint sounds. Chang was too far away for a perfect sending, but he had got that of Tau. He was on his way.

The stars were out, swift and sharp and steely. Chang would be there soon after dawn. The women were in from the gardens, their fires were lit. The warriors squatted with drooling mouths, saving their appetites for strong meat. All the males, even the suckling infants, would share *that* feast.

"He will come. The *kapitani* will surely come!"

So spoke Ipanu out of his cage.

A FIRE was lighted in the singsing ground. The dance commenced, with Tau star-performer, the warriors carrying skull-tipped poles, following him in a serpentine line, making short charges, prancing in a ring, while the women shuffled in slow circling about them, and the big tree-drums boomed and bellowed.

"He will come," said Ipanu. "Now that it is dark, he will come."

The women were holding peeled wands. As they shuffled they swung their hips, and joined at intervals in the chant of the warriors who, wet with sweat, hopped, skipped and jumped about the roaring fire. About each man's middle there was a girdle of hibiscus bark from which swung a long twist of fiber, like a tail, held by the man behind. Tau sat on Chang's lava throne, triumphant.

Ipanu's swollen head throbbed. He and his fellows were stiff from thongs of sinnet; thirsty, hungry, weak and wounded.

Tau regarded them gloatingly. The women gibed at them, made bawdy gestures that spoke of degrading mutilations.

"Pretty soon I think we die," moaned one of the Papuan crew.

Ipanu's neck and spine were stiff. The back of his cranium was caked and clotted with blood. A woman shouted a taunting insult at him that was a hideous promise. He ignored her, and answered the man who had spoken.

"He will come. Beristoli will come in time," he promised.

Bristol was not taking it lying down. Alternate sweats and droughts had weakened him, his bronzed skin had crimsoned patches from the fever and his head was dizzy from the buzzing in his ears. But he shook it off, he blasted the sickness out of him with rage and indignation as they brought Marlowe aboard and laid him dead on the deck.

Bristol was two inches over a full fathom, he had a chest like a barrel and a neck like a bull. His eyes were deepsea blue and now they flashed like the crest of a sunlit wave. His hair was thick and black and curly.

"Kill one of my men, will he?" he roared. "Raid my watering party? I'll show those yaw-bitten blacks where they head in! I'll show Chang magic—*white man's magic.*

"Send a man aloft, mister," he ordered Walters. "Keep one up there so long as it's light. We can't do a damned thing until

it's dark. We don't want to get nipped in the bush. That man-eating Mongol'll leave white man's ships alone after we get through. You'll take over, Walters. We won't be long and, by the Eternal, I'll levy toll!"

There was one prime urge to his wrath, though without it he would have gone ashore just the same. But he and Ipanu

were blood-brothers. They had exchanged names in formal ceremony with their open veins tied close, their blood in mystical transfusion. They had risked their lives for each other. Their friendship was the strong, proven fellowship of man to man.

Bristol hoped for a surprise attack. He did not even dare to risk a landing before nightfall. Their lookouts might spot his landing party. But at night the bush trails were deserted. The bushmen themselves would be behind wall and stockade, on the sing-sing ground, where fire drove off the shadows in which the evil demons lurked.

Ipanu and the others would be there. Ovens would be dug, stones heating, aromatic leaves ready for the joints of long-pig; yams and breadfruit prepared as vegetables for the main dish of human flesh.

Darkness swept down from the heights and the last peak grew cold; all seemed hushed, brooding, waiting for the curtain to rise on grim, stark tragedy.

Bristol led his men. Walters, against his will, was in charge aboard. There had been no sign of Chang. In case of alarm the mate would send up rockets. Watching every rod of the hard beaten trail for traps, pits set with stakes, vines triggered to discharge envenomed arrows, the skipper's torch drilled through the darkness.

A land breeze blew overhead, two hundred feet above the tree tops, but it was hot in the bush. It reeked with fragrance so intense it smelled like decay. Great moths flitted by, phosphorescent fungi gleamed. Sweat made the stocks of their rifles slippery, glued their garments to them as they toiled on and up and, presently, caught the sound of chanting, the squeal of pipes above the perpetual rumble of the drums.

Twice the trail proved blind and ended in a pyramid of rotting, grinning skulls. Once they could look seaward and they saw the *Sea Swallow,* like a shadow, on a long inshore leg. They saw the line of foam on the reef, luminous with seafire, its voice muted by the great drums ahead.

THEY halted when they could see the pulsing glow of the fire beyond the walls of Chang's citadel. They took their breath, watched the sky. No rockets yet!

"All right, Henderson," whispered Bristol. He felt in his canvas satchel and brought out the "white man's magic" he and the supercargo had prepared. Half-sticks of high-percentage dynamite. It was used for blasting reefs and it was ticklish stuff to carry. Each half-stick was split, the fulminator bound in the cleft together with the short fuse, also split.

They both worked together. Bristol and Henderson had each a lighter they had tested carefully. They set broken match-tops in the forks of the fuses, nipped them there. Henderson thrust three more half-sticks inside his shirt, next to his chest, hairy as a badger's.

They could see the gatekeepers leaning on their spears, gazing towards the sing-sing grounds.

"Okay?" whispered Bristol.

"Okay!"

They sparked their lights into flames, cupped in their palms.

"Ready?" Bristol snapped back to his crouching men, armed with pistols and machetes. Rifles would be no good at this cutting-out work.

The matchheads sputtered, the fuses glowed and flung sparks. Bristol and Henderson stayed back of trees as they silently checked the time.

"One salamander! Two salamanders...!" they counted.

They stepped to the open trail and flung their bombs. A lookout peered down, yelled. The spearsmen wheeled about.

There was a rending racket as the gate blew up in a belch of smoke and stench of flame. Guards went catapulting as Bristol and his men rushed the gap, racing for the sing-sing grounds. A dynamite bomb exploded among the tree-drums and they toppled.

The warriors, caught unarmed unassembled for war, broke like unbelievers on the Day of Judgment.

Tau leaped up and Bristol sent a bullet through his shoulder, shattering bone. He then kicked him into the fire.

The scattering embers revealed Ipanu in his rattan cage, the trussed-up members of the crew. Bristol saw the lava seat from which Tau had sprung, saw the calabash and the divining-stones. He had heard of those magic stones of Serak. They might be of scant value to him, but they were part of

the mana of Chang, and he pocketed them as he saw Ipanu released, the others freed.

He was not through. He meant to teach Chang a lesson, once for all. He led the way to the great hamal, the spirit-house, up and over its barrier of logs. There was no door, only the high hurdle of timbers and, above that, matting.

Bristol flashed the ray of his torch into the interior, past the stalls where the men kept their weapons and private possessions. At the far end was a great stone image, enormous, long-eared, long-nosed, short-limbed. Skulls everywhere on racks. Set against the walls at the far end, were weird effigies like mummies. Tribal modelers had sought to reproduce the features of dead chiefs in clay upon the skulls. They had fiber for hair, mandrake roots for hands and feet on the stuffed bodies.

Bristol left the hamal flaring to the skies. They fought their way out against half-hearted resistance. Tau's hide was crisped, his prestige was gone, the tribesmen would not rally to him.

Bristol carried aboard four of the effigies, the temple-drum and the sacred stones. Those pebbles were famed in South Sea ports. The loss of them would gnaw at Chang's conceit.

ABOARD the *Sea Swallow* was a supreme cargo. Bristol had cashed in on his experience. He had a hundred tons of Macassar shell, gold and silver-tinged, classed as "Prime Number One," worth a thousand dollars a ton in fancy lots. He had almost a peck of selected pearls. Some were the favored greenish-blacks, others pinks, or rosies; the rest cream. He had traded off the silvers for his overhead.

He meant to sell those gems in Europe. He meant to take Mildred there on a honeymoon. She had waited for him seven years, ever since she was eighteen and he twenty-five. He would buy back the land of his Connecticut forebears. They would establish a home and a family. He held fortune in his hull. He had fought against ill luck, against men, against weather. He had wrested it from Nature's secret lockers and, by the Eternal, he was taking it home. Every seaman dreams of life ashore. Bristol meant to be a squire of broad acres, the sire of lusty children; last but not least, Mildred's lover, her husband.

He had kept himself clean. To go native never appealed to him. He had cabled Mildred he was coming home—to their home—a conqueror.

THE sun lipped the horizon. It rose swiftly, a disc of burnished gold, dazzling and resplendent. Bristol looked into it and saw the catamaran of Chang.

The wind shifted with sunrise. The *Sea Swallow* hauled sheets and braces, close-hauled. Chang set his great inverted lug to the full breeze and came charging down.

Chang knew all. The drums had sounded again with the news of disaster, even to the crisping of Tau; the loss of the sacred stones, and the burning of the hamal.

He stood upon the central platform, a tall, enormous, yellow man with a queue coiled atop his shaven skull like a snake. His eyes held hellish fires. He had lost face, he had lost the sacred stones. The spears, the bows and arrows and the trade-guns of his men lay handy, but to use them they must cease paddling. On the central decking Chang had a dozen picked warriors, chieftains.

He cursed as he saw the barkentine head up for him, handled precisely, Bristol himself at the wheel, watching the llghtest quiver of his canvas, judging drift. Calling brisk orders. The crew jumped to ropes, and sprang back to their weapons. Walters and Henderson had a supply of half-stick bombs, lighted cigars in their mouths for the fuses.

Bristol watched the oncoming catamaran. He watched the wind flaws on the sea. He luffed. He brought her up and the sails were stiff as boards. He sent the *Sea Swallow* hard for the war-canoe, sent her prow between the double hulls, while spears and arrows flew and trade guns barked.

"Let 'em have it," yelled Bristol.

Winchesters cracked while the mate and supercargo hurled their explosives. The grass cabin was tossed like a hayrick in a hurricane. The twin hulls split, waterlogged. The barkentine surged through the wreckage. The tribesmen swam, wounded, dying, and the crew of the *Sea Swallow* picked them off. Out of the mysterious

voids of the sea, sharks came, smelling blood.

One remnant of the decking floated intact. One figure rode it. Chang! Bloody and crippled, but alive. He defied them. His voice came down wind like the deep note of a brazen gong, cursing them.

"Want to get him, sir?" asked Walters. He had Bristol's own sporting rifle in his hands. He knew the skipper was a crack shot.

"No," said Bristol, "let him go. Give him his chance."

Bristol felt that Marlowe was amply avenged. Chang had a slim chance at best, thirty miles from Serak, now like a shadow on the sea.

The wind was with him but he had no paddle, he was alone, hurt, the ravening sharks were nosing at his makeshift raft.

"Let 'im *go?"* asked Henderson. "You're barmy if you do. That bloke's a magician."

"Let him go," repeated Bristol. "Pass that word, mister." They were swiftly hauling out of range. "Let him prove his magic."

Chang still cursed them. Without question, it was a thorough curse that possessed elements reaching back to the lore of ancients. Spells that Kubla Khan knew of, that Marco Polo described. His fragment of planking tossed on the sapphire seas, sharks rushed to the extermination of his men, shredding their bodies. They nuzzled his tiny refuge. And still he cursed.

"He's got guts," said Bristol. "There's nothing yellow beneath his hide."

Henderson, as supercargo, stood no watch, but he came off deck at eight-bells midnight and saw Bristol fingering over the divining stones. He had put them in a blackwood box bound with brass, in which he kept his smaller curios: tikis, whaletooth breastlets, fishhooks of nacre, greenstone charms.

"Me and Walters," said Henderson, "we both 'eard the sound of drums just now. There ain't no nearer land than Serak and that's a long way off. But we 'eard it, and it ain't natural. You was wrong to let Chang live, Skipper. It's them stones. Magic, they are; 'e cursed you 'cause of *them*. If I was you, I'd chuck 'em overboard."

Bristol let the soapy-feeling pebbles slip back into the box, closed and locked it, grinning at Henderson.

"You're getting old, Henny," he said. "You want to clean the wax out of your ears. You and Walters both. As for Chang's curse, it's on *my* head. To hell with him! Take a dram, mister."

"I will, at that," said the supercargo, and helped himself liberally from the bottle of squareface. "To 'ell with 'im! But I'm 'oping we don't meet 'im there, for 'e'll be in favor."

THE time came, before long, when Henderson croaked again. The cargo of shell shifted mysteriously and, two days out of Singapore, the *Sea Swallow* caught fire and had to be outhauled for refitting.

Off Marika, in the Solomons; homeward bound; a big blow set them on the coral. They had to fight off the savages and Walters got a bonewound from a spear, that refused to heal.

They picked up two men in a prau off Timor and beriberi came aboard. Bristol and his men staggered about with stiffened limbs and muscles that had no strength. Walters died.

"One of those blarsted castaways on the prau was a Chink," grumbled and mumbled Henderson, whose teeth were salivated, his gums mushy and bleeding. "The other might 'ave been, if 'e'd looked like anything 'uman. Why don't you chuck those Serak stones over the side? 'Oodoos, they are! Jinxes! I've seen such things before. So 'ave you."

Bristol nodded.

"I've seen it," he said. "Pagan stuff. Trees with spirits living in them. Old as the hills. You don't have to come to the South Seas to find those beliefs. Magic either. But curses come home to roost. What in blazes do you want me to do?" he added irritably, for their bad luck griped him.

"Sail for Serak and hand them over to Chang? I'll not do it. They're the last thing I'll toss away," he said obstinately.

They were off the Galapagos, heading up for Panama and the Canal when the barkentine, slogging along before a following breeze, smashed into a mammoth log raft gone adrift, water-logged, awash. The *Sea Swallow* struck and broke her sodden bind-

ings. The timbers rammed the ship, pounded, pierced her, broke her back and battered her from stem to stern. It was the middle of the night and Bristol, rushing on deck, knew her sinking by the head, taking in water like a sieve, foundering beneath his feet.

Dawn found their three boats on a leaden sea, windless and sweltering, under-provisioned, rowing toward the sullen archipelago. The barkentine was in the ooze with her precious cargo. In the swift and increasing confusion of the sudden wreck. Bristol, concerned in getting his men away, was almost trapped in the cabin by the inrushing waters, the lurching of the doomed vessel. His safe, built-in beneath his desk, was already under water, that rose with every surge.

HE CAME away with a chronometer, a sextant, the log and the chart he tore from his chart table. At the last second he clutched the brass-bound box and came up the companionway with the stones of Serak rattling in their casket beneath his arm. Henderson was in another boat, Ipanu was in Bristol's.

Bristol's was the only boat that made Chatham Island, the only one ever heard of.

"I'm a poor man now, Ipanu," said the skipper. "I shall go home on Shipwrecked Mariner's bounty. I have a small farm in my country that was once a big one. I had once hoped to buy it all back. They grow tobacco there. It may be that I shall grow tobacco. I am sick of the sea, my friend, Beristoli."

Ipanu glowed at the sound of his blood-name.

"I shall to try to have you sent back," Bristol went on. "Where would you like to go?"

"All places are the same to a lonely man," the other answered. "I have no women, no children, tuan. Have you a wife?"

"There was a woman, but I do not wish to come to her with empty hands," said Bristol moodily.

"To a woman a man should be a master," replied the Oriental. "His words should be more than pearls. His wants should be her riches because she shares them. I know not how the women of your country act, tuan. After all, tobacco is a great solace, though not so great as betel. Tuan, send me not back. Let me stay with you and serve you."

"My friend can never be my servant," replied Bristol. He was shaken and he did not trust himself to say more.

BRISTOL and Ipanu sat in front of the fireplace in the Connecticut farmhouse where the captain had been born. It was October and, to New Englanders, the weather was mild. But big logs were blazing, heat gushed out of them and still the two were cold. There had been rain, the leaves were turning.

Their blood was thin. Bristol had been too long in the tropics and Ipanu belonged there. They both belonged there, Bristol told himself, as he shivered. It might be a touch of ague, he thought. He'd sooner have Island-fever.

He got up and walked moodily to a corner cabinet, an old-fashioned, triangular whatnot. He took up the brassbound box and put it on the table, sitting there, taking out the tikis, the savage charms and trinkets, the stones of Serak; fingering them.

Ipanu watched from the fireplace, motionless, hugging the warmth.

It seemed almost as if the curse of Chang was working. Even though Chang was dead. There had been news of that, a brief item in the paper. Chang's last raid offended Government. There had been a punitive expedition. Chang's citadel had been shelled, Marines landed—and the mighty magician had been ignominiously hanged as a lesson that headhunting days were over.

The leaves whispered outside, there was a low mutter of thunder in the hills. It was a little warmer. Indian summer was at hand. But Bristol still shivered, Ipanu hugged the fire, the atmosphere was cheerless.

Bristol tossed the stones and they fell in an irregular ring. They did not divine anything for him. One of them, the largest, gave out a dull gleam as if the eye of some imprisoned devil had winked at him.

He was a failure. It took knowledge to grow tobacco. It took capital. It was best to buy it prepared in tins, as long as one had the money.

He stuffed an old pipe and lit it. But the

weed had no solace for him. Ipanu did not smoke. Bristol knew what Ipanu craved.

There had been one consolation. Mildred was absent when they arrived. He had not cabled her again. He did not have the cash to spare, and why speed ill news?

SHE was back now. He had seen her that morning and shrunk back as the girl and her escort had cantered over the bridge that spanned his little brook. He was not sure if she had seen him. She was snugly breeched, sweatered in yellow, her yellow hair uncovered. The man with her was groomed to perfection, their mounts were glossy as polished horse-chestnuts. Her people were well off, she had social aspirations.

Social aspirations—hell!

The low thunder muttered again. It was like the roll of drums. Drums, sending a message to Chang. Drums heard far out at sea and telling of barbaric orgies where naked savages pranced on the sing-sing grounds.

Ipanu stirred.

"Someone comes, tuan," he said, and glided from the room. Bristol remained at the table. He did not doubt Ipanu's keen senses.

It was not yet dark, only a purple dusk.

The ancient knocker sounded. Mildred stood on the stoop alone as Bristol opened the door. She had tied her horse.

"May I come in?" she asked.

Bristol followed her into the room. The firelight leaped upon the paneled walls of ivory-painted wood, dingy and cracked. Her gaze took in everything.

"Rather cozy," she said. "But a trifle warm. Warmer than your reception. Well, the mountain has come to Mahomet. I heard you were home. I waited for you to come to me. I saw you this afternoon when you slunk back in the thicket. Why?"

"You seemed interested," he said.

"I was. Do you imagine that I will let the gossips say that I waited years for a man, who has returned—to neglect me? That was a man who *wants* to marry me. I heard you were shipwrecked—not from you. Friends told me. You cabled me you were coming home to take me on a honeymoon to Paris, through Europe and to the 'Eden Isles of the East.' That was the wording, I believe."

"I couldn't take you on a honeymoon to Danbury, Mildred. I have lost everything."

"You have lost me," she said. "If you ever wanted me. I made up my mind this afternoon. I came here to show you—this!"

She flashed a diamond set flush into the gold circlet, a man's ring.

"He has a small hand," said Bristol. "Congratulations to both of you."

Her face grew ugly as Medusa's. She struck him across the chest with her crop.

"I thought you were a man," she said. "I didn't know you were licked."

Licked? Bristol stood stock still, hearing her gallop off. Licked? Not by a damn sight!

He turned as Ipanu came back into the room.

"Ipanu," he cried, "let's get out. I can sell the place for enough to take us to Saigon, to Singapore or Sourabaya. Let's get away."

Fire that had long been banked came to life in Ipanu's eyes.

"It is good, tuan," he said, "if the tuan is sure."

"Sure? You bet I'm sure. I'll sell out. I'll give this junk"—he motioned to the curios on the table—"with what's in the barn, to the museum here. I'm through with souvenirs."

"The woman, tuan?"

"I did not have her price, Ipanu. I couldn't afford her, at any price. She's like most of them, I reckon. I thought some of them were different."

"Most women may be bought, tuan. And—there are always women."

Bristol laughed for the first time since he had returned.

"I'll go see Pulaski now and close the bargain. He's got the cash. Curry some rice,

Ipanu. We may have to go aboard through the hawsehole, but we'll be sailing—soon!"

THE curator of the Brookmead Museum looked up from his desk, shifting his spectacles to better see the upstanding man in blue serge, bronzed, with eyes that sparkled like the crest of a deepwater wave; over a fathom tall; virile and dominant.

"I sent for you, Mr. Bristol," he said. "Rather, I requested you would come here, concerning your gift to the museum. It is much appreciated, I assure you."

"I'll send you more," said Bristol heartily. "I'm going East next week. Through the Canal. Tell me what you want. Kingposts, images, weapons—?"

"That is good of you, Captain Bristol," said the curator. "We shall be glad of anything, especially from one who was born close by. But there is a part of your recent donation we do not feel we should accept."

"Why not? There are no fakes. I collected them myself."

"I do not doubt it, Captain. However—we understand that you have sold your property, that you lost a fortune you accumulated. Do you know what these are?"

He brought out from a drawer in the safe the divining stones.

"Those? Those are the sacred stones of Serak. I took them from Chang, of Serak. Hanged for headhunting. What are they, agates?"

"They are diamonds, Captain Bristol."

"Diamonds? From Serak?"

"They find diamonds, and excellent ones, in Borneo, Captain. Serak is not far away. The geological formation is not dissimilar."

"They don't look like diamonds," said Bristol. "Not that I ever saw any in the rough; but by God, I thought these were pebbles picked out of a stream because of their shape! Do you suppose they are worth much?"

"I am not an authority," said the curator, "but I should estimate their value at something like a hundred thousand dollars, after they have been cut. Some of them are cloudy. That may be remedied to some extent, I understand, by imbedding them in radium bromide. Of course, we could not accept such a gift, especially under the circumstances."

"Wait," said Bristol. He divided the gems into two even piles, leaving the largest stone apart.

"Half for you, half for me," he said. "Never would have known a thing about them, but for you. Give me forty or fifty thousand dollars, and I'll turn it into ten times that, back where I belong. With Ipanu. No arguments. If you want papers, make 'em out. I'll sign 'em."

He waved aside the curator's half-hearted protest, picked up one pile and thrust them into his pocket as if they were mere agates, though they were, as he knew well enough now, the stepping-stones to a new fortune. The largest stone he regarded whimsically.

"I'll send that to Amsterdam," he said. "Have it cut and set in an engagement ring."

The curator beamed.

"It will be a princely gift," he said. "Your fiancée—"

"She's not my fiancée," said Bristol. "But I don't like the ring her fiancé gave her."

HE SURGED in on Ipanu.

"We are rajahs, Ipanu," Bristol cried. "Those sacred stones are diamonds! We're rich. Forty thousand dollars! Do you remember that barkentine we saw in Koochau Creek? Twenty-five thousand they wanted."

"Yes, tuan. She may be bought for less. These days there are few purchasers."

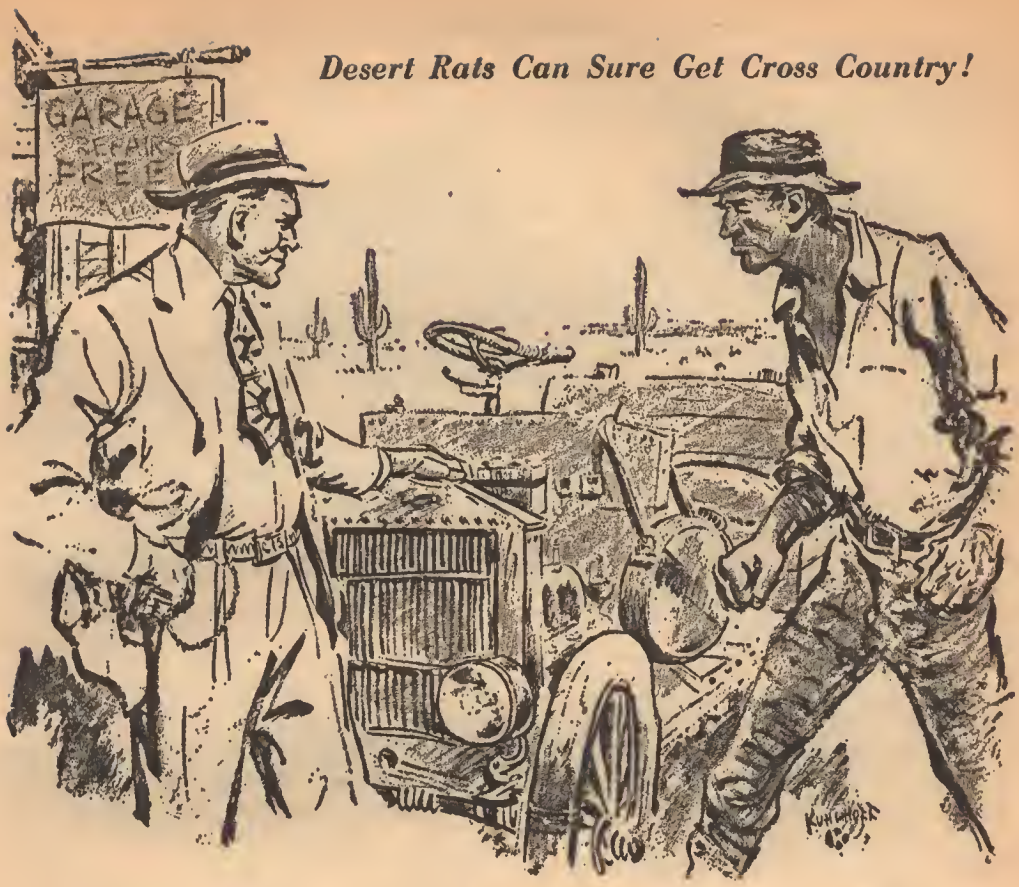
"We'll buy it. You were right, Ipanu-Beristoli. Chang is dead! We are footloose and fancy-free!"

"Yes, tuan." Ipanu's mouth was watering for betel-nut and leaf and lime.

"There are always other women," he muttered. "The tuan is too young to wed. When white men marry they place fetters on their limbs."

He grinned at the fireplace. There were only dead embers now but he did not feel cold.

"In my land," he said, apparently to the ashes, "fires burn in the open." And he spat upon the hearth.



Desert Rats Can Sure Get Cross Country!

The Speed-Hound Of The Pintado

By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

MOVE 'long, ki-yote! Give yourself a li'l more gas 'f you reckon to nose us out to the Crossing. Told you so! Told you you'd have to jiggle the spark some 'f you wanted to show your tail to the Girl here. So long, ki-yote! Pick a six-cylinder car next time you crave to race; don't take no speed hound like the Girl here."

Ginger Gus waved a mocking hand at the animal, who suddenly had broken off a tireless lope to sit amid the cholla and give his tongue room to drag. The coyote smiled admission of defeat. Then the steering wheel buckled as the Girl did a double roll in a sand swale.

"Easy go, now—easy! 'Member that patch on your off front tire's just holdin' by a gob of chewin' gum an' your pop won't have money for new shoes to come next month down to Yuma. 'At's right! An' don't tell me that li'l piece of bob-wire I spliced onto your contacts is hurtin' you none. I took the stickers out before I used it."

Answering chuckle from somewhere in the rusted cylinders forward of Ginger

Gus's feet, from the Girl's shamelessly naked vitals stripped of such prudish covering as a hood—a chuckle spreading straight from the steel heart of the Girl to the doting heart of her pop. Oh, they understood each other, did Ginger Gus and his Girl. He petted her with little love pats of a finger on the throttle; she purred and gurgled back at him. No father ever nursed and coddled a frail child with more watchful tenderness. No child could repay affection by more earnest endeavor to be good.

This day the glory of life was brimming over for Ginger Gus, gasoline tramp. For he was once more on the road, on the road with the Girl, and going no place in particular. Before and behind him was the unrolled wonder of the Pintado Desert —just two wheeltracks in the sand leading through. Oil in the cups, gas in the tank, water in the canteens, and hittin' on all two! Gold and blue overhead, yellow gold of mesa and organ butte all round, flower of the deerhorn and flower of sahuaro, road-runner with tail up and going like the wind. God, how good!

Tell 'em, Jim Henry; tell 'em this for me:
I ain't long on looks; I ain't much to see.
But for dancin' with the Mex girls
I'm a bear !
In the cool of the evenin' when the fiddles sigh—
In the dark of the evenin' when the moon is high—
Ears pinned back an' lard on my hair;
Listen to me come—I'll be there!

Miles of the tawny desert rolled back under the Girl's frail wheels. Castle Rock, away ahead yonder, slowly changed outlines of battlement and scarp and the Ship lifted its purple sails over the horizon, spotting Las Palomas on the Los Angeles-Phoenix highway—Las Palomas, lone gasoline station on a hundred-mile stretch of emptiness marking the traverse of the Colorado. Ginger Gus approached the straggling hamlet with a vague distaste of encounter. He hated towns—even such apologies for towns as Las Palomas. If he so much as slept next to a three-strand wire fence he was sure to catch cold from the draft between the wires. Wagon tracks encountered anywhere in his rovings between Goldfield and the Line always brought to Ginger Gus the feeling of suffocation, a decent country being all cluttered up. Yet he must pass through Las Palomas to renew the gas in the Girl's tank and the tobacco in his pouch.

The town popped up over the first bench of the Gila. Ginger Gus was in its midst.

Three signs were visible to the wayfarer down Las Palomas' main street; one said, "Garage—Repairs—Free Air and Water." Thither the Girl trundled by instinct, and she came to a sighing halt before the red gasoline pump. Gasoline gypsy of the desert that she was, the Girl should have been abashed by the company in which she found herself there. An aristocratic grand dame of paved boulevards and tiled garages stood before the door of the garage, proudly, albeit not without difficulty in keeping balance of dignity. For the stump of one bare axle showed above the nub of a jack; one of the lady's dainty wheels was missing. The rest of her was all stream lines, chrome flutings and shining glass. All her accouterments marked her as a fast lady of the speedways.

Ginger Gus sprawled with one leg half out of his seat, let his eye range critically over the lovely, though wounded, creature's lines. They fostered in his soul a reaction very similar to that produced by a homesteader's shack in the wilderness. Here was one of them dude cars from the big city, all prettied up and nowhere to go. Just about as handy to cover desert roads as a baby buggy! Break a leg at the first dry wash!

Ginger Gus's frankly disapproving stare was being returned—so he discovered in time—by a large man in a nylon shirt and loud slacks who was easing his shoulder against a patch of shade under the garage awning. This individual's heavy lips were drawn down to a leer of amusement where they were not occupied by supporting a cigar. The creases about his eyes were pinched together in a quizzical squint. His getup proclaimed him the owner of the rakish car, for no man in Yuma County could wear the clothes he did and remain long in Yuma's jurisdiction.

What he saw justified, perhaps, the man's

unconcealed amusement, he being one of those big city fellahs and lacking in common sense: The Girl, a frame with four wheels, naked engine, no dash, no top, no running board, no turtle-back behind the seat; gas tank of zinc big as a Saratoga trunk lashed to the rear axle by straps of iron; wired to the side of that a spare tire resembling a bundle of wet wash. The whole had a sag forward caused by the fact that the front axle had cracked and had been reinforced by a rifle barrel lashed with wire, splint-like, along the fractured part. A twist of wire similarly helped hold one of the tires in place in absence of lugs. One lamp was missing; its twin sported a common house bulb in its socket with no protecting lens. Of paint, not a vestige about her. Of leather, not a shred—the seat was pine with a stuffed grain sack nailed to it. Her radiator front bore the imprint of a cow's head sunk in the mesh.

As for Ginger Gus—well, six foot three of nothing much. All legs in blue overalls, feet in bumpy leather and hands in a covering of red fuzz. Faded red was the hair of him, or what showed under a sugarloaf of nondescript felt; faded blue his eyes; a sunbaked red lay beneath the stubble of red beard. His mouth sagged in sympathy with the Girl's cracked axle. Ginger Gus was as new a type to the big city man as the latter was to him. Just a gasoline tramp who craved to wander on four wheels instead of afoot; here a little job of pitching alfalfa hay; here a little assessment work on a prospect; over yonder a bed-down for the winter with a job at hauling wood. Lover of the silent places, devotee of the desert's burning altar, distruster of all men—that was Ginger Gus.

AFTER the two had eyed each other and each the other's vehicle after the manner of strange dogs, Ginger Gus nursed the Girl's gas tank in range of the pump's hose and began to siphon the fluid. The man in the sport shirt detached himself from the patch of shade and sauntered over to look down upon the Girl's naked engine. Out of the tail of his eye Ginger Gus saw this deliberate act of discourtesy and hotly resented it. He saw a fat thumb go poking and exploring amid pipes and wires and instantly let go the pump handle to stride around and put himself truculently before the stranger.

"Mebbe you lost somethin' in there, a diaming ring or a lady's powder puff or somethin'?"

The heavy man looked up at the smouldering eyes with a laugh meant to be disarming. "Some car, Joe!"

"Notice she's travelin' on four legs instid of three," sapiently. "An' somethin' tells me this car, mister, could travel rings around a lot of fancy cars I might name." Ginger Gus bit into a plug of long sweetenin' as if it were the heavy man's neck. The other was not dismayed; he pointed to the rifle barrel splint.

"Notice you're traveling armed. Sort of hard to get at your weapon if you needed it, I should say."

"Ain't seen a skunk in this country for goin' on three months until today," Ginger drawled the words with unction. "I don't shoot nothin' else." The owner of the crippled beauty took a piece of waste from his pocket and polished vigorously at a dust-and-grease smudged spot on one cylinder jacket. Ginger Gus was too surprised at this added effrontery to protest. The big man leaned over the scoured spot and gazed earnestly at something. He brought his head up with a jerk.

"Some car—I said it!"

"I heerd you the first time." Ginger's great hands began to flex inward, a sign of danger and of imminent personal violence to someone in Yuma County.

"Look at that number!" The city man's enthusiasm was on the increase. "First year's output, and like Johnny Whosis, still going strong!"

Ginger Gus was unmoved; he was deliberating between the relative efficacy of one to the chin or one behind the ear. He had about decided in favor of the ear—

"Jim, do you know this car was made by the same people that turned out that hot beauty over there? Their first car, and umpteen years ago! What d'yuh think of that?"

A fist, not at all attractive with its red nap of hair, reluctantly abandoned for the moment the contemplation of trajectories. Its owner leaned forward to look where a stubby forefinger pointed. He saw a faint inscription raised from the metal of

the cylinder jacket, a number of only three digits and a name followed by "& Co." He had seen this inscription before, but attached no more significance to it than to the size tag in a new hat.

"Uh-huh," grunted Ginger Gus noncommittally and with reservations against further insults which might be directed against the Girl. The stranger turned upon him impatiently.

"But say, man, don't you get me? This car of yours is probably the only one of that year's make still away from the scrapheap—and not so far away at that. It's a real relic, if you make me, a genuine exhibit!"

Relic, exhibit? Ginger Gus let his eye travel in a swift message of love over the attenuated skeleton of his sweetheart. It took in the fractured axle so efficiently restored by the lashed rifle barrel, the recently added bob-wire to the contacts (and how the Girl had kicked her heels over that bob-wire!), the radiator which once had saved his life by yielding precious water. Wrath flared anew.

"Looky here, Mister Man, Yuma's a pretty big county as counties go in this desert country, an' it has a repytation for being the peaceablest county in Arizona state. But it ain't big enough to hold you and me together at the same time. Now, this road here leads out of the county if you follow it long enough. You get your pretty bird cage over yonder fixed up with a real wheel and—travel!"

He had calipered one long leg over the steering wheel and was settling into the stuffed grain sack serving for a seat when the owner of the pretty bird cage renewed his importunities. With a foot daringly rested on one of the Girl's wheel caps he assumed a confidential, almost pleading, attitude of voice and manner.

"Now don't go away mad. Anything I've said about your tidy little ship is to its credit. Nobody but the Matchless people could make a car that'd hold together as long as yours. Wish you'd listen to a little business proposition 'bout this jalopy of yours."

Ginger Gus was busy jiggling the spark. The Girl, smarting under recent criticism, had elected to go into a pout. Ginger Gus must needs probe under his seat for his crank. The man in the loud knickers hurried on.

"My name's C. Throgmorton Smith. I'm Pacific Coast manager for the Matchless Twins, office in Los. Going to be a big auto show in Los next month and we're planning a knockout of an exhibit. Got 'bout a half acre of floor space and got to fill it. Features, that's our game! Get me?"

Ginger Gus's attenuated northern hemisphere was describing parabolas in front of the radiator. Apparently he did not get, or care a hoot about getting, Mr. C. Throgmorton Smith. The latter whipped a fat hand to a hidden pocket and brought out a wallet. He riffled through a sheaf of bills and selected one with a plain engraved 100 in its upper corner. This he waved as a flagman might wave at an absent-minded pedestrian.

"A century note in hand this minute to seal the bargain. No contract, no agreement, nothing but just your promise that you'll be in Los a day before the opening of the big show with your car and you'll let her stand in our exhibit space during the two weeks of the show. Right in the place of honor, man! I'll spend fifty bucks to build a special booth over her. Then at the end of the show I give you five hundred more for your trouble, and trade a new Matchless Cozycorner for your bus in the bargain."

The Girl suddenly began to chatter and shiver over her spare frame, all agog with excitement. Ginger Gus stood up and turned a vague eye to where the hundred dollar note dangled like a plug on a bass line.

"You say you want to make a show of my Girl here?" threateningly.

"Not a show, Jim, an exhibit. Want to show 'bout half a million people in Los what a fine little sketch you have." C. Throgmorton was quick to train his guile on the other's weakness. Unerringly he had read pop's doting pride in his Girl. The yeast of deceit stirred an immediate ferment:

"I don't crave to spend no time in towns, Mr. Frog—Throg—er-r; but if you say folks in Los'd be likely to come round and give the Girl here a fav'rable look-see—"

"She'd be the hit of the whole show!" C. Throgmorton banged his diamond into

a cupped palm. "Nothing like her, I tell you, from Maine to Magdallena Bay. Here, take this hundred-spot as evidence of good faith on my part. And here's my card: 'C. Throgmorton Smith, Sunshine Building, Spring Street.' I won't worry about your delivering the goods. Just remember you're to be at my office the day before the show opens—that's the fifteenth, and, say, send me a wire from Redlands or San Berdo saying when you expect to hit town."

C. Throgmorton's speech came in such a rush that before he knew it Ginger Gus held the bill and the business card in his flattened palm. The gasoline tramp looked down upon the bit of cardboard and length of green script with the vague eye of one seeing some new fauna of the desert found, say, in one's blankets.

"Well, sir, I don't know—"

"I do!" A familiar clap on the back from the Matchless manager. "I know a man of honor when I meet up with him. Don't want a receipt. Don't want a damned bit of writing. See you in Los on the fourteenth."

In two minutes Pop and the Girl were faring out across the wonder scroll of the Pintado. The Girl was stepping high, wide and handsome; already in anticipation she was Queen of the May. As for her pop—well, a century note in his pocket gave him a thrill never before experienced, and—and by the Ringtailed Rinkatoo, the Girl'n he would show these big city folks somethin' worth while!

Purple mountains away off yonder, winds smelling of greasewood flower, little desert wrens perking heads out of nest holes in the sahuaro, as though they were going to yell "Cuckoo" twelve or fifteen times; nowhere to go but right on yonder into the gold and glory-dust. God, how good!

Tell her, Chiquita; tell her this for me:
I ain't got religion, my language it is free;
But my heart's pure gold an' graded fine!
By the banks of the Gila I got a little shack,
Some cotton an' some chickens an' likewise a jack.
She says the word—says she is mine—
Listen to me come, my Eglantine!

II

THE day before the opening of the Los Angeles auto show all the countryside round about San Berdo and on through Pomona got a treat. Where the paved highway winds about the flanks of green hills and buries itself in the smother of orange groves, fleet, low-swung monsters of shining chrome, glass and velvet finish swerved like skittish colts to give right of way to a travesty. Lonely Iowa tourists wedged into sight-seeing buses and sneezing mournfully at the scent of orange blossoms perked up in spirits when a something propelled by gasoline skittered past them. Ranchers' wives ceased smudging beehives to run to front fences and stare.

For Ginger Gus and the Girl were coming to the big show.

Not joyfully, mind you, nor with unalloyed pleasure of anticipation. But grimly and goaded by a sense of honor, of obligation to be expunged by service. If only Ginger Gus had had that hundred case note intact he would have mailed it to Mr. Throgmorton Smith from Yuma or Aztec and told Mr. Smith to go somewhere thermal. But—alas!—the hundred was not intact. At Yuma, back yonder, twelve of it had gone to a Chinaman for a second-hand shoe, in excellent preservation, to fit the Girl's off front foot. Eighteen seventy-seven of it had gone into a suit of store clothes; twenty-two cents into a non-destructo collar; three-ninety into a neat but not gaudy hat, and sixty-five cents had been squandered in a bow tie which hooked behind. Ginger Gus had hesitated long over the temptation to buy a new lamp for the Girl; it wasn't fittin' for him to rig himself out like a new, red-brick schoolhouse and not doll the Girl up some. But, he figured, utility and not good looks was her crown of glory; he wasn't going to make damn fools of both of them. At the last night's camp back near Palm Springs he'd gone over the Girl with a monkey wrench and himself with a razor; then he had packed his proper overalls under the seat and wriggled into the store clothes, the collar and the hook-me-behind tie.

Ginger Gus called all the world to witness that he felt like hell.

"And the Girl, too; she wasn't feeling

very pert. Twice between Palm Springs and San Berdo Ginger Gus had been forced to snip pieces of bob-wire from nearby fences and wire her up a bit. Even the rifle barrel —and the Girl had gone over three hundred miles on it—had begun to work loose and act cranky.

Dawggone everythin' into the middle of next week!

At Pomona Ginger Gus stopped at the telegraph office and sent a wire to C. Throgmorton Smith. "Coming—Ginger Gus." He had added some comments to this simple statement of fact, but the girl behind the counter said she was not allowed to send such words.

At Glendale the shock which Ginger Gus and the Girl had been distributing en route was transferred to them as passive and recipient factors. There across the highway to Los Angeles, but a few miles away, was ranged a double rank of glittering gasoline baubles; twelve Matchless Twins in their paint and nickel and velours. Each car bore some flaunting legend hung across its hood: "Oh, Lookit! Here's Grandma of the Matchless Twins," "See Who's Here. Matchless Made Her All the Years Ago."

Ginger Gus put on the brake with a jerk and sat glaring at the greeters drawn across the road ahead. To him came C. Throgmorton in his classiest sports' suit and wearing his best salesman's smile.

"Welcome to the big city, Ginger Gus. Look at the escort we've brought out to take you to the show auditorium. By golly, man, I knew you were the bird to keep a contract just on your own say-so!"

The man was all lard and honey. But the gasoline tramp was not prime for blandishments; his kindling eyes never left the line of dude cars.

"Those there signs, mister. Do you figure me to go into town behind all that honky-tonk stuff?"

"Why—why, that's advertising, Ginger. Livest advertising a man could get." Ginger Gus began deliberately to unhinge his long legs; by a bewildering series of evolutions he suddenly was materialized on the pavement beside the Girl. He started to stride away. C. Throgmorton, aghast, ran to catch him by the sleeve.

"You're not running out on my, Ginger!"

"I sure don't aim to be no bearded lady in a sideshow. No, nor the Girl don't neither!"

The Matchless manager tried threats and pleading to no purpose. Ginger Gun would not move the Girl an inch further, and nobody possessed the technique to move her but him, until those ribald aspersions on her character were stowed out of sight. Finally this proffered compromise was reluctantly accepted, though Ginger Gus could not know that before the suburbs of Los Angeles were reached each screaming banner had been hastily draped across the backs of the escorting cars, out of his sight.

The City of the Angels is a trifle blasé in the matter of premeditated public spectacles. Traffic blocks in the heart of the business district caused by a million-dollar comedian becoming stuck in hot tar are rated old stuff and even messenger boys give no more than a casual upward glance to a man crossing the street hand-over-hand via a telegraph cable. But this day of the advent of Ginger Gus and the Girl caused even the tired eyes of Los Angeles to flutter surprise and interest.

Contrast, the psychologists say, is the surest rivet for attention. Here was contrast with the muffler off. Twelve sleek cars painted like Easter blossoms and shooting sunlight from every facet; bridesmaids of Gasoline Row undulating toward the altar of publicity. One outlandish nondescript on wheels, tiptilted forward on her gimpy axle; desert dust heavy upon her monstrous gasoline tank and the tarpaulin-hooded blanket roll tied to a spare tire behind; tires patched and wires in place; an ensemble of rakish decrepitude. Twelve drivers in livery, stiff as manikins behind their wheels. One gaunt, red-faced giant with the collar of an overtight jacket riding below his ears, sitting rigid in self-consciousness at the wheel of the desert stranger.

Los Angeles saw and applauded. Applauded gustily, did Los Angeles, when the Girl, catching an infection of embarrassment from her pop, balked smack at the junction of two carlines at Hill and Fifth. A traffic cop bustled up to be fended off by the suave and wordy C. Throgmorton. Stalled electric cars jangled gongs. Sirens of impatient autos screamed protest. A miserable Ginger Gus looked wildly around for a bob-wire fence.

Uproar increased and still Ginger Gus sat petrified. C. Throgmorton leaped to the Girl's side with a "For the love of Gerald, do something!" Thus galvanized Ginger Gus uncoiled himself from his stuffed grain sack, rummaged for a monkey wrench in the box beneath, and performed some miracle of easement upon the Girl's vitals. The doting creature responded gallantly and the cavalcade moved on to the auditorium without further interruption.

In a haze Ginger Gus drove as directed through wide doors and down a vast promenade between ranks of steel-and-velvet beauties. C. Throgmorton directed him to bring the Girl to rest under the canopy of a special pavilion wrought of palm trunks and decorated with cactus stumps and the massed campaniles of yucca blossoms—the Matchless manager's conception of desert atmosphere. Hardly had Ginger Gus descended from his seat when C. Throgmorton was there with a sleek-haired young man in tortoise-shell goggles.

"Ginger, meet m' friend, Archie Bunting. He's the show's publicity man, and he wants to get a little interview with you for the newspaper boys."

The goggled one put out a codfish hand with, "And how do you feel, Mr. Ginger, on coming to the big city from the desert wilds?"

"The telegraph sister wouldn't put on the wire how I feel, so I guess no paper would print it. Leave me be!" Ginger Gus brushed past the publicity man and stalked for the nearest door, a quarter-mile distant. C. Throgmorton, unhinging a creasy smile, let him go unhindered.

Of Ginger Gus's interminable wanderings in the big city, of his panics at street crossings and trepidations amid crowds, this chronicle must be mercifully reticent. Once he found a drugstore window wherein two Gila monsters lay inert in some sand; he watched the pink and black lizards for an hour, suffering agonies of nostalgia the while. Then he struck up acquaintance with a long-haired medicine man in a beanery. The worthy doctor spoke Ginger Gus's language and invited him to put up at his hotel. He spent the rest of the day on a bed, finding four dull walls more restful and far safer than crowded sidewalks. Depths of misery were his to explore.

III

"GINGER GUS says——"

The gasoline tramp sat on the edge of his bed on the morning following his arrival in town in painfully spelled out of a newspaper page a monstrous fabrication. It was built around a comic artist's conception of Ginger Gus at the Girl's helm, Ginger Gus in chaps, sombrero and six-shooter.

"Ginger Gus says: I got the ringtailest car in the Pintado and she kin beat any fancy bird cage on wheels in Los."

And again:

"Ginger Gus says: Gimme a coffee can, a bob-wire fence and four wheels off'n a carpet sweeper, and I kin build you a automobile most as good as the Girl."

For many minutes Ginger Gust sat on the edge of the bed with the offending paper on his knees and looked through the drab walls out and away to a delectable country beyond the divide, country where any man's word was good as wheat; where no man euchred another into a corner just to make a monkey out of him. The lanky desert man was as dangerous an individual as ever trod Los Angeles pavements when he quit his mean hotel, bound for the automobile show and vengeance.

But the subtle genius of the big city moved to thwart him the instant he passed the turnstile and came under the spreading roof of the great auditorium. Crowds! Crowds of milling, jabbering people eddying, swirling, shoving. They stepped on him, they elbowed him. One particularly unthinking elbow dislocated his glazed dickey, like an oxbow outside his vest. The big fists which had curled in anticipation of a meeting with a doodle-bug, Mr. Archie Bunting, forgot their mission and were used only to fend a way out of the press.

"Give me a stampede of Sonora longhorns ev'ry time! Fellah can flap his hat in their faces an' eyes, anyway."

Unable to fight back to the entrance against the tide, Ginger Gus suffered himself to be carried forward into the body of the auditorium. This place must have a back door where a fellah could slip out somehow. He was vaguely half conscious of the petted beauties of steel and glass haughtily glaring at him from behind velvet ropes and hedges of palms; and what did register on the

retina of his mind left him scornful. Yes, and a bit of paternal yearning crept through his fear of crowds. Somewhere in this five acres of human gumbo was the Girl—trusty old Girl!—alone, forsaken! Lot of these lop-eared galoots prob'ly poking their dinky canes at her insides and rubbing her up to look at her number like that buzzard, Frog Smith, done in Las Palomas.

Ginger Gus was whisked into a back eddy somewhere under springing girders; such a crowd ahead of him he couldn't get through. Faint scent of yucca bells came to his nostrils to rouse anew the pangs of nostalgia. His height permitted him to look over the heads of the mob; his eye kindled when it fell on the rotund form of C. Throgmorton Smith. The man evidently was standing upon some sort of rostrum and he was making a speech. Ginger Gus could see his fat lips parted in a grin to emphasize something which brought an answering ripple of laughter from those about him.

" 'She's traveled three hundred miles a'ready on that rifle barrel an' I reckon she's good to ride a thousand more just that way,' said my long friend, Ginger Gus." A patter of snickers interrupted for an instant the flow of the Matchless manager's witticisms. Ginger Gus felt the crawling of hot caterpillars' feet up and down his spine.

"—and my lengthy friend added he could kill skunks on the dead run by simply maneuvering the Girl, here. Why, my friends, I invite you to step up and give the Girl, here, a critical examination. See for yourself if a skunk would have any chance, rifle or no rifle on the axle, with the Girl all steamed up on all two cylinders and stringing her little gas cloud across the Pintado like a glue factory afire. I—"

Six-foot-three of nothing much but boiling wrath and rawhide muscle bent itself in a battering ram and began a boring progress through the crowd. The sinister figure of Ginger Gus reared itself on the rostrum where stood the traducer of the only Girl in the Pintado. The throng, closing the wake left by his impetuous progress, stirred in expectation of a thrill. C. Throgmorton left his speech hooked in mid-air as he turned a suddenly mottled countenance to the interrupter.

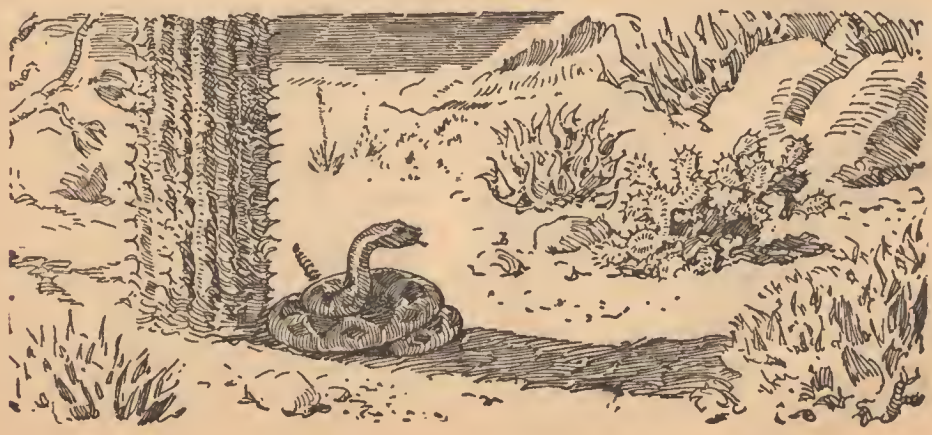
"Mister"—Ginger Gus's words came deadly soft—"Mister, I think you said I was to have five hundred dollars for exhibiting the Girl at your show. Am I right?"

"Why—uh—yes, Ginger. But what's—what's——?"

"Here's the main idea, Mister Man: Tomorrow you take any car you've got round here—take your best—and bring it along with me and the Girl over to the Arizona line. There I'll race you two hundred miles—or five hundred cross-country. My five hundred agin' yours; winner take all."

Flabbergasted as he was, C. Throgmorton managed to fish his ready smile out of confusion. "Now, Ginger, you're talking foolishness. You know I can't get away for any such shenanigans during the show. What's more, your car is on exhibition here and—"

"Not after tomorrow she ain't." The inevitableness of Doomsday was in Ginger



Gus's tone. "You take me on for that race or the Girl goes out of this stable tomorrow, prompt."

Came delighted buzzing from the listening crowd, treated unexpectedly to a bit of unrehearsed comedy as the tag to C. Throgmorton's snappy, humorous turn. Most tickled among the hundreds was a seal-haired youth behind goggles, Mr. Bunting, the publicity agent; no less; for was he not having handed to him a story with trimmings on a silver salver? The Matchless manager, realizing how his erstwhile center-stage position was being crabbed by the desert man, attempted a brilliant recovery.

"Ladies and gentlemen"—turning to flash his grin on the crowd—"here's an example of the spirit which makes the Matchless car invincible. Owner of the oldest Matchless in captivity challenges the youngest and spryest of the children to a cross-desert race. Grandma and baby out for a romp!" In an aside to Ginger Gus, "Clear out! See me here tomorrow, nine o'clock."

The gasoline tramp parted a way for himself through the grinning throng. He found that the back door to the show palace whose existence his instinct had prompted him to suspect and tramped grimly back to his hotel room. Ginger Gus was by way of avenging aspersions on the name of a beloved.

Said a newspaper headline that afternoon: "Coffee Can Challenges Champion; Ginger's Grandma A Game Sport." And the conscientious Mr. Bunting had passed out to the newspaper boys covering the show tidy little interviews with several managers handling lines rival to Mr. Throgmorton Smith's Matchless. One such boldly announced his money as being on Ginger Gus's Girl; the Matchless, he intimated, hadn't turned out a real car since their first. A second offered to have one of his own cars handy to the course to tow both contestants over the finish line.

Publicity which was not exactly water under C. Throgmorton's wheel! And when the morning papers leaped to the lure and treated the race as an assured sporting classic only to be matched by the annual Speedway Cup race, that gentleman had every reason to remember his doctor's caution anent blood pressure. To him, rampant and ranting, came Ginger Gus on the dot of the appointment.

"You double-rimmed maximum of deletion," C. Throgmorton's form of greeting, "do you see how you've gummed up the cards for me? Look at that!" Ginger Gus did not look at the extended paper; instead he kept his painfully expressionless eyes on the manager's countenance while with a tentative hand he reached behind his collar and patted back into place the aspiring hook-me-behind tie.

"Now, look here! You get this damn fool idea of a crazy race out of your head right pronto or out goes your piece of junk from the Matchless exhibit. Hear me?" C. Throgmorton was slipping easily into his Grade A bullying manner. Ginger Gus's answer came with deceptive softness.

"Mr. Frog—have I got that right?—Mr. Frog Smith, one of these newspaper boys run me down last night an' took me to see a nice sort of fellah who says he's manager on the Coast for the Elijah Chariot. This Elijah man says he's got a this year's Matchless he'll race against the Girl if you back down. Says he'll give me a thousand dollars if he loses, an' most likely he'll lose. The newspaper boy says his paper's ready to back me an' have a special car there to watch the race—"

"You trying to blackmail me into a piece of damn idiocy?" C. Throgmorton's face was slowly purpling.

"Just trying to tell you, Mr. Frog Smith."

It required ten minutes of conversation during which Ginger Gus remained mute, for C. Throgmorton to be convinced that he was in a jam. Everybody along Gasoline Alley ready to give him the hoarse hoot if he didn't take on this mad desert tramp at the latter's own terms!

"Where you want to start this wild-eyed race of yours, and to where?" came the final growl. Ginger Gus, who had been making some shrewd mental surveys of the desert country since first he broached the project, masked intention with a seeming of indifference.

"Well, sir, any place in the desert not too far away for you. What say we make the start at Niland down in Imperial Valley, make it over the plank road to Yuma and—just to make it sorta sporting—push along the Phoenix road far as Aguas Calientes."

"Why, you poor goof, I'll be there and meet you coming back," explosively from C. Throgmorton. Ginger Gus's pale eyes were almost sad as he sighed, "Then you won't owe me nothin', Mr. Frog Smith; winner take all, you know."

"See you at Niland seven o'clock tomorrow morning; that is, if your wreck can make it down there before that time. Now clear out with your ding-donged Girl before the crowds begin to arrive."

An hour later the Girl stood in a mean garage not far from the show building and her pop went over her lovingly with pliers and a wrench.

"Hear me, Girl, when we gets that ole chuckawalla Frog Smith in the sand t'other side of Yuma, just you lay back your ears 'long that back road you and me knows up round Castle Dome, and extend yourself!"

IV

THERE are many places in the world where dawn strikes a more sympathetic note than in the environs of Niland, in the upper reaches of the Salton Sink beyond the zone of a reclaimed inferno. At its best Niland's tin-can dump cannot glow properly under the rosy fingers of a new day. Nevertheless, a short time after sunrise of a day when Pacific Coast auto-racing was in the making, this potter's field of Niland's balanced ration became the rendezvous of forces in suspension.

Force No. 1 was represented by a very long, very trig racing car which resembled nothing so much as a naval torpedo with war-head in place, and ready to launch itself in lethal attack against an enemy armored belt. Heavy it was, with wheels far apart and of an extra wide tread; chassis low to the ground and neatly balanced on secret springs; power crying its presence from gill-like vents in the hood and an exhaust pipe calculated to carry away the fumes of a volcano. C. Throgmorton Smith, who filled the racer's narrow cockpit, had gone in for this business of beating a broken-backed, thirty-year-old desert spinster in a grim spirit of travesty. He had provided all the scenery of a cross-country classic.

Force No. 2—or call it X, the unknown quantity, if you will—was embodied in the Girl, who had ambled down from Los Angeles over the whole of a casual day and enjoyed a comfortable bed-down in Niland's garage overnight. In surface aspect unchanged was she as she prepared to enter the lists. Perhaps an extra can of oil lashed to her side, a spare canteen of water against a thirsty radiator. None but her pop could know that under the stuffed grain sack serving as a seat were several assorted scraps of scrap-iron picked up in the garage and its neighboring blacksmith shop, a roll of wire—for country where bob-wire fences were not—and a third-hand inner tube blistered with patches and stiff with age. Ginger Gus was canny in his prevision.

Gasoline spectators were there: two newspaper cars from the big city, each with its live wire eager for the chance to file somewhere a satiric commentary or, better yet, a straightaway human-interest story. And another gas vehicle of subdued, yet forceful mien whose passenger was the Pacific Coast manager of the Elijah Chariot; he was down to pick up whatever scraps of advantage might befall to the hurt of C. Throgmorton Smith.

Smith himself descended stiffly from his cockpit—a bit of post-exposition conviviality and the long night ride down from Los had not tempered the springs of his being—and strode over to where Ginger Gus was busy filling his oil cups.

"S'pose you haven't any real money to put up with a stakeholder, Ginger." The gasoline tramp straightened himself with a look of child-like innocence.

"Reckon all I've got is the five hundred the Girl ain't yet earned for me as an exhibit at your show. But if that goes—"

"Just for the show of the thing," C. Throgmorton caught him up, "here's a check for a thousand made out in your name. You get to Aguas Calientes first and it's yours." He called over one of the newspaper boys and with a ceremonious flourish passed the bit of pink paper over to him.

"Ready, Ginger?" The Matchless manager was back in his racer and had the engine roaring. Ginger Gus looked up from his cranking of the Girl's reluctant spark and nodded an affirmative. C. Throgmorton was off from the tin-can dump with a roar and a spurt of flame out of his car's exhaust pipe.

"I've seen a city dog after his first jack rabbit start that way," Ginger Gus mused aloud at he climbed into the Girl's seat and carefully let his gears in mesh. "But mostly he don't finish with such a bust of speed. Come on, boys, let's go."

With which the Girl and her gasoline gallery moved out across the Salton Sink at a sober pace of twenty-five miles an hour. Already the Matchless racer was but a smudge on the eastern horizon.

THEY call it highway between Niland and Yuma on the Colorado; perhaps that is by contrast with what lies beyond Yuma. Still, even as desert roads go, and with the fifteen miles of plank road laid down across the deepest sand, this ultimate California segment of the Border Trail is about as passable as a detour in South Carolina. So long as one sticks to the wheel tracks and ventures not into deceptive cut-offs he will reach destination with reasonable certainty. So Ginger Gus and his escort came to Yuma sedately and with no air of hurry. The hour was noon.

As the Girl did her dot-and-carry-one down the main thoroughfare of the town C. Throgmorton Smith waved from a chair tilted against a hotel pillar. He was enjoying his after dinner cigar with the air of one to whom time was a negligible quantity; his racer stood ready at the curb. Before Ginger Gus had halted the Girl at a nearby garage the Matchless manager rose, stretched himself languidly and seated himself behind the controls. The hoot of his car gave Main Street a thrill to its high-heeled boots.

"Boys," Ginger Gus turned to his gallery as he unscrewed the cap from the Girl's gasoline tank, "boys, if you listen to me you'll take after ole Frog Smith now and leave me go my ways. As I figure it, the excitingest part of this here race lies ahead, an' with this Smith fellah."

"But, Ginger, the story lies with you." One of the reporters entered protest and the Elijah man nodded approval.

"Of course, you're free to follow me if you can," Ginger Gus graciously admitted, "but I misdoubt any one of your cars can do it. The Girl and me takes a short cut from here to Aguas Calientes over country where a car's got to tread light as a lizard's foot or get buried in sand. No road to speak of any part of the hundred an' twenty miles."

Ginger Gus and his trailers chugged out of Yuma to the east, where straight up-and-down mountains of Pliocene mud lay barriers against the first step-up to the mesa waves, making all Arizona a many-gabled roof. Just a ribbon of road through bad lands, here and there a reminiscent relic of assessment work done in some spurt of the country's prosperity, a road to crystalize the soundest axle and try the toughest tire with its lava outcroppings. Ginger Gus took it leisurely; far from being a contestant in a race, one would have set him down as a river bottom rancher jogging home from town. A few miles of this and Ginger Gus turned into a crossroad to the north, crossed a bridge over the Gila and—vanished!

Magic, pure magic! One minute he was on the dim road, rooting aimlessly along; then a sudden swerve out of the rut and smack into a thicket of greasewood and mesquite where no road existed. A flash of the monstrous gasoline tank, the ghost of a smoke cloud and the forest of scrub had swallowed car and driver! Thorns, exposed roots, prickle traps of dead cholla; the Girl skimmed over all like a water spider.

For many minutes the interested gallery from Los Angeles sat in their cars stupefied. They looked out in the direction of the Girl's disappearance. Mountains there with their bases buried in the long, slow wash of their own scourings; mountains giving no hint of a way through for even a burro, much less a bit of snorting junk on wheels. Satisfied that Ginger Gus had thrown the race and taken this means of saving a shred of dignity by disappearance, the reporters and the saturnine Elijah manager made shift to turn in their tracks back to the main highway where they could take up a tardy pursuit of C. Throgmorton.

As for Ginger Gus, once he was buried in the mesquite forest, he pulled the Girl up short and leaped nimbly from the seat. Quick fingers manipulated the valves on each tire, releasing sufficient air to bring the patched rubber cylinders down half flat. So was the Girl provided with padded feet like the camel's, and for the same reason that the desert ship walks on pads—

that they might take traction from yielding sand without becoming trapped. Then the lanky driver got back on his stuffed sack and gave her the gas.

Now was Ginger Gus driving as no auto owner along paved highways in a softer land could dare count possible. Driving which only the desert man—and not all of him—knows how to do. Cross country, no road, guiding post, bridge or culvert. Cross country, quicksands of dry water-courses to be negotiated by little flying leaps, steep banks of arroyos to be taken in reverse and opposite bank at an angle threatening overturn at every revolution of the wheels. Here the snags of dead greasewood had to be avoided by a lightning turn of the wheel. There a badger hole sucked at a hind wheel and only just the right spurt of gas won the Girl through.

Always Ginger Gus, leaning forward over the wheel, kept a finger on the pulse of the engine; to that sentient finger at the throttle came, second by second, calls for help, warning of strain. Ever Ginger Gus had his eyes just six feet ahead of the front wheels.

Once a snag gave the radiator mesh a side-swipe. Ginger Gus halted and examined the damaged part; he saw water dripping beneath the front axle. Out of his pocket came a ten cent bag of flake tobacco to be dumped into the radiator. The tobacco found the leak in the honeycomb of cells, swelled and stopped it.

Hour after hour this skittering and devil-hopping cross-country along a true arc of the circumference which C. Throgmorton's racing car was following on the highway! Three miles gained to every one which the Matchless manager was making. And the last fifty miles the racer must cover were the worst of the lot; Ginger Gus had not arbitrarily chosen the course for the race.

The heart of the man sang within him. Those moments when he dared look up from the gruelling concentration on the way he saw Castle Dome raw against the blue; the old pal appeared to be leaning his scarred head to watch the Girl and her pop humble a big city man. Over yonder the blues and lavenders of the Gila Bend range beckoned destination and the finish line, friendly-like, glad to see the Girl and her pop back in their proper country.

It was near sunset and a glory was marching over the west when Ginger Gus recrossed the Gila not five miles from Aguas Calientes and came once more to the so-called highway. From a height of land some miles back he had seen a cluster of specks on this road, stationary dots of black against the yellow, and he had read surely what those specks told. Five minutes chugging on the main highway and he came to the denouement.

Three cars stalled in line and nose to nose—the newspaper cars and that of the Elijah man. Ginger Gus pulled up some ten feet behind the last one and languidly calipered himself out of his seat. A group of men up forward turned as he approached. Blank surprise cried from each countenance.

"Ginger Gus! Why, we thought you had quit the race five hours ago!"

The gasoline tramp made no answer to salutations and questions. He strode on to where the Matchless racer lay torpedoed and square across the road. Her front axle had cleanly snapped, letting her nose down into deep sand. C. Throgmorton was standing there with a jack in his hand. He grinned wordless greeting.

Ginger Gus made a casual inspection of the crippled racer; but despite appearances his quick survey of certain scorings and scrapings in the sand about the front wheels was not at all casual.

"Tryin' to jack her up?" he drawled.

"Oh, just monkeying around," C. Throgmorton answered. "'Course she's out of the race. Waiting for a team or something to come down from Aguas Calientes."

Ginger Gus took a deliberate bite into his plug. "Funny—huh?"

"Yeh-ah, damned funny!" snorted C. Throgmorton. "Let's give ourselves the big laugh—haw-haw!"

"I mean funny how, when you was jackin' her up, you just happened to slew her round so's to block the road. So's I couldn't pass when I ambled 'long. I mean, you thought I couldn't pass, most likely."

The Matchless manager thrust out his chin and glared. "It looks from here as if you had the whole state of Arizona to pass in. I don't see anything to hinder."

Ginger Gus took two steps off the shallow

crown of the road and sank up to his shoelaces in soft sand. He turned his faded blue eyes to meet his opponent's sneer.

"Sure, lots of room, like you say, Mr. Frog Smith. Reckon I'll just pass you. Got a business engagement in Calientes an' it's drawn' on late."

"Pass ahead," a shrug of fat shoulders; "you have my permission."

Ginger Gus strolled back to where the Girl waited. All but C. Throgmorton followed curiously. Then the gallery was treated to a bit of wizardry.

They saw Ginger Gus open a clasp knife and set the blade along one seam of the stuffed grain sack serving for a seat. The burlap fell away, revealing some tightly-wrapped substance. Ginger Gus lifted the bundle and began to unroll it. Interminable lengths, each perhaps two feet in width and fully thirty feet long; then a second set of similar ticking strips.

Ginger Gus gathered an armful of the first set of mysterious first-aid affairs and, stepping to the side of the road, began laying track over the top of the treacherous sand—a track the width of the Girl's wheel span. Very carefully he stretched and patted the lengths of ticking in a slight arc down from the crown of the road, then parallel to it and past the stalled cars. The second set of emergency traction givers continued the track almost but not quire opposite the broken-down racer. It stopped fifteen feet from the safety of the regained road.

The gasoline tramp seemed to find his work good, for with easy grace he settled himself on the seat behind the Girl's wheel and started her engine into song. He backed the Girl some twenty feet down the road, poised her there for an instant, and then came forward on high.

Light as a tight-wire dancer, she balanced at the crown of the road, swerved ever so slightly, and sped out over the ticking track. Her half-filled tires spread out like a duck's foot when they struck the shifting support. Mincingly she took the dirty-blue trail. She slowed to a halt not two feet from the end of the ticking strips.

Then there was nothing for her pop to do but to renew the track ahead and back to the road crown from the strips already traversed. A ticklish business, starting from the sand. With the first kick of the gas the Girl's wheels spun uselessly, grinding the ticking runway deep into the sand. A shrill complaint was wrenched from the willing heart of her. But inch by inch she crept and wavered up the slight incline to the road. There she stood trembling.

The broken Matchless racer was behind her and a free fairway ahead to Aguas Calientes.

While the newspaper men crowded close with congratulations, Ginger Gus painstakingly wound his ticking strips into a bundle and stowed that beneath the seat. Then came C. Throgmorton Smith to stand by the Girl's side.

"Ginger Gus, I want to buy this little beauty from you. Want her to put in our show window in Los with a standing challenge to take on any racing car of any make for a desert cross-country."

Ginger Gus favored the Matchless manager with a steady stare. "Mr. Frog Smith—do I get your name right?—the Girl ain't for sale." Then turning to the group behind him, "Which of you gents carries that li'l slip of bank paper?"

One indicated himself as stakeholder. A nod to him. "You come ride with me into Aguas Calientes."

Tell 'em, senores, tell 'em this for me
She's give me her heart an' throw'd away
the key.
Hombres, keep away with your gui-
tars—

C. Throgmorton Smith, sitting hunched and disconsolate in the cockpit of his broken racer, caught a scrap of song borne on the first wind of dusk.

Red Iron

By MALCOLM FOWLER

"Nothing to It, Nothing at All!"

SPRING had come to Wellington. A bare-headed young man with a vacant look in his eyes sat on a bench in Riverside Park and chewed the end of a pencil while he tried to think of a new word to rhyme with "love." Sunlight glancing down through the budding branches of the trees, waving in the warm breeze blowing up from the Gulf Stream, cast lacy patterns on the ground below. A wandering tomcat crooned a love song to a lady friend ensconced coyly on a limb above him. A couple of sparrows in another tree vociferously discussed housekeeping arrangements. Truly, a scene to excite romance in the breast of the most hardened.

Yet there was little to excite romance in the scene taking place in the near-by tar paper covered office of the construction superintendent of the Yorktown Bridge and Iron Works, who were building the new Front Street bridge across the Wellington River.

The timekeeper, busily figuring his profits from loaning the workmen money at ten per cent interest per week, was literally blasted from his seat by a burst of passionate profanity from the direction of the little cubicle the superintendent called his private sanctum. Snatching at his time book, he looked up, feverishly hoping the boss had not discovered there was a bottle missing from his last case of tiger sweat.

Framed in the doorway, Riley Batchelor presented every indication of a man having a fit. Brown hair bristled; blue eyes were shooting sparks; the lips were curled back like a trapped hyena's; the big frame was quivering, while he waved aloft a letter.

"See here, Cox!" he shouted, his voice high with feeling. "What that damned, red-headed, hairy-eared, skinflint Grimsby has the brass-eyed nerve to write me!"

Secretly relieved, Cox obediently reached for the letter and, while Mr. Batchelor ranted and raved around the office, read its contents. They were short and to the point:

"I am dissatisfied with the progress being made on your job. Your costs are running entirely too high. It cost you ten cents each to drive the rivets in the tower bents of the viaduct. Should have driven them for eight. And your costs for concreting the bascule piers were absolutely prohibitive. Erection costs, too, are running up. I thank you to take immediate measures to reduce these, or before we start setting the steel for the bascule span certain changes will be made in your organization to make them lower. As you well know, setting the leaves of this span is a delicate and exceedingly important operation, and things must be exactly right if we are to make a profit on the job. In fact I deem it wise to put an older and more experienced man in charge of this project. We shall see about that later, but in the meantime get your costs lower.

"Yours truly,
"H. P. Grimsby."

Horace P. Grimsby was the general superintendent of construction of the different field forces of the Yorktown Bridge and Iron Works, and when he was feeling particularly liverish after a hard night with hard liquor the above is a fair sample of the type of letter he would send to his various field superintendents. Besides, in his opinion, it served to keep them up to snuff, so to speak. Having only been recently employed by the company, this was Mr. Batchelor's first experience of the sort, and he took it hard.

"Costs! Costs!" he vociferated. "Of course the costs are running higher now, but I'm still under the estimate. Thinks I'm not competent to set that bascule span, does he? Well, I'll show him whether I'm competent to do it—the shambling, sheep-faced son of Satan and a she camel!"

Snatching the letter from Cox, he ripped it to shreds, threw the pieces on the floor and stamped on them. Then, thinking a bit of language would be good for his overwrought feelings, he hastily mobilized his choicest collection of oaths and set about launching them in alphabetical order. A quarter-way through the recitation his condition was sulphurous. Rounding the half-way post he realized he was having the best cuss since Cicero Brinkley turned over the pile driver at Washington. Nearing the three-quarter mark he saw from the tail of his eye his straw boss, Mr. Hurley, standing in the doorway, listening with reverence and awe; and this was heartening. He wound up in a blaze of glory with a disrespectful dissertation on all general superintendents of construction, with H. P. Grimsby, like Abou ben Adhem, heading the list.

Much relieved, he stamped out of the office and down to the boat landing where, in company with Cox, he stepped into the company power boat and crossed the river to see what progress "Red" Rogers was making in excavating the fountadion for the last of the piers. What he saw didn't serve to soothe his ruffled feelings.

AN A-FRAME derrick squatted at one edge of the rectangle of steel sheet piling surrounding the excavation. The steam operated pile hammer, suspended in its swinging leads from the boom, was silent. But a motor driven, double diaphragm pump was sucking water from the hole with a sound like a hungry hobo eating hot soup. Down at the bottom of the excavation a group of workmen stood idly around a log, the end of which disappeared under the piles, and nodded admiring approbation as Red Rogers indulged in an enthusiastic swearing spree.

"Cussing's not going to get that log out of the way, Red!" bawled Riley.

Mr. Rogers, who was built somewhat on the lines of Bashaan's bullock of Holy Writ fame, raised a red, sweat-streaked face to glare hostilely at Mr. Batchelor with pale blue eyes. "Who the hell said it would?" he demanded.

"Not one blasted foot of progress has been made since I was over here this morning," fumed Riley. "Why don't you get that damned log out of the way and do something?"

"If you want it out of the way," pointed out the red-headed one, "come down and do it yourself."

At this gross insubordination Riley's temperature popped up like a chart of the stock market when news comes that Congress had suddenly adjourned.

"By the purple-toed Prophet!" he yelled. "That's what I've got you down there to do!"

Rogers, who had lost what little religion and patience he ever had, wrestling with a log he was firmly convinced the devil had placed there for his especial benefit, boiled over.

"You come down here!" he raved. "And I'll cram you in one of these cracks to stop a leak!"

"You and who?" inquired Mr. Batchelor, unbuttoning his coat.

"I! Me! Myself!" thunderously replied the beefy Mr. Rogers.

Joyously, the superintendent accepted the challenge. Flinging off his coat, he surged over the top of the sheets and down the ladder like a fireman answering a three-alarm signal. The other readily advanced to meet him.

"Fight! Fight!" went up the cry from above, and men came running from every direction.

Now, Riley Batchelor had been light heavyweight champion during his senior year at Carolina Tech five years before, and he had no doubt of his superiority over the heavier but slower Rogers. His first intimation that all was not right came when he thought one of Red's men had treacherously whanged him on the left ear with a pick handle made of seasoned second-growth hickory.

Swinging a hard right to Mr. Rogers' face, he swiftly turned to dispose of the treacherous pick handle wielder before he could get in a second blow. It was then that he discovered there were no outsiders engaged in the affray. Also, that his speed counted for naught in the mud underfoot. Turning again to face Mr. Rogers, he collided with that person's fist with his right eye. Off balance, he sat down squashily in the mud. Birds twittered; a planet which he dimly recognized as Saturn with its encircling rings sailed by. From a vast distance he heard someone saying, "Get up and fight."

The mists cleared. He scrambled to his feet and sprang on the startled Mr. Rogers like a leopard on its prey. And right there the struggle ceased to be a gentlemen's bare knuckle classic and descended to the level of a brawl, say, between a couple of lesser Neanderthals fighting over a choice cut of dinosaur steak.

He grabbed Mr. Rogers around the waist, hurled him in the mud and fell on him. Seized with inspiration, Mr. Rogers crowed lustily, caught Mr. Batchelor by the hair, pulled his head down and enthusiastically endeavored to chew off an ear.

Now, Mr. Batchelor loved his ears with all the passionate devotion of a good man for his mate. "You would, would you?" he snarled, doubling his right leg and driving his knee into the other's stomach.

"Woof!" said Mr. Rogers. Loosening his hold on his opponent's hair, he swung a right to the face, rolled over several times to his feet and stood gasping for his lost supplies of air.

Then Mr. Batchelor was upon him. Smack! Wham! Smack! To the eye; to the nose; to the mouth. Half-blinded Mr. Rogers swung a wild haymaker which flung Mr. Batchelor to a squatting position. It was from that position the superintendent started his last blow—a blow which ended just one inch to the left of the point of Mr. Rogers' chin. Slowly, the big foreman's form collapsed against the side of the steel sheets and slid down to the mud.

Mr. Batchelor rolled an inflamed eye upward at the circle of interested faces ringing the inclosure.

"All right, gentlemen," he mumbled through thickening lips. "The battle of the century is ended. You now have my permission to go to the various places of your alleged labors. Mr. Timekeeper, you will deduct fifty cents admission from each man's time next pay day."

He turned to observe Mr. Rogers sitting up, gingerly feeling his lower jaw. "Who slugged me with that ten-pound hammer?" demanded the foreman dazedly.

Then the light of reason returned to the lusterless orbs of Mr. Rogers. He looked aloft, then at the hoofprints in the mud, and spat out a tooth. Slowly, he got to his feet and moved toward the ladder.

"Hey!" called Mr. Batchelor. "Where you started?"

"After my time."

"What for?"

"Ain't I fired?"

"Hell, no!" exploded the superintendent. "I want you to get that log out and the hole down to elevation. You can burn it out with an acetylene torch. Fired? Why, damn it, I never heard of such a thing! What do you think I licked you for?"

"Right," said Mr. Rogers. "Send over the torch and watch the mud roll out."

BACK in his private sanctum Riley surveyed himself in a cracked mirror and summed up the damages, to wit: an ear that felt as big as a five-pound cabbage, a split lip and three loose teeth—not to mention the throbbing head. His condition, he decided, demanded special treatment. He began the treatment by searching out a bottle of his favorite brand of East Lake corn whiskey. "This," he muttered, as he downed a stiff dollop, "is for the headache. I'll take another directly for the eye. A third will nicely anchor those loose teeth, while a fourth will take care of the split lip."

Having completed the prescribed treatment, and vastly benefited thereby, he replaced the bottle and reached for his hat. Full of corn whiskey and determination, he pranced out of the office like a courtly goat and headed for the bridge, where he tempted a number of the workmen to quit outright by his caustic comment of their lack of progress.

Going down the bridge he discovered Cox shooting crap with the instrument man and promptly docked him an hour's pay.

"Not," he explained, "that I am personally averse to casting dice, but you're not supposed to do it on the job."

He reached the end of the first truss span where a riveting crew were lolling on their platform under a hip connection and smoking cigarettes as they watched a couple of tugs nurse a big tramp freighter through the opening where the bascule span would be located. The superintendent's wrath, backed by eight ounces of East Lake moonshine, flamed up.

"What the hell you polecats think you're hired to do?" he shouted.

A smut streaked face peered over the edge of the platform. "You talkin' to us?" it inquired.

"Yes! You!" screamed Mr. Batchelor, furiously pounding the batterchord with a sixteen inch spud wrench.

Pounding on the batterchord with a spud wrench was all right. It helped you let off steam and lent emphasis to your remarks. But Mr. Batchelor was clutching this same chord with his left hand and his thumb got the full effect of an illy-directed blow. The wrench went in the river and his thumb in his mouth as, sick with pain, he glared with tear-filled eyes at the men above.

"We're waitin' for Steve to fix the air hose. It blew apart just now," explained the smutty faced one.

"Whyncha say so?" mourned Mr. Batchelor, heading for the office and first aid.

"Whoosh!" he shuddered, lowering the bottle. "One more letter from Horatius P. Grimsby, and I'll be looking for a hospital as well as a new job."

AS HE applied iodine to his battered thumb he thought over Mr. Grimsby's reference to setting the bascule span. Certainly, it wasn't going to be the easiest task in the world, but Riley Batchelor had handled tough jobs before he ever heard of the dyspeptic H. P. Grimsby and the Yorktown Bridge and Iron Works. Hell! Hadn't he put down that cofferdam in Little Coharie when three good supers had given it up? Hadn't he set those eighty-ton girders on the South Elm Street underpass when no one else would tackle the job with the available equipment? Certainly, he had. And setting the leaves of the bascule span didn't faze him an iota, navigation requirements included.

A peculiar condition existed on this job. Front Street was the logical point to begin the spanning of the river, for the Wellington was quite narrow, comparatively speaking, at this point, thus cutting down the cost of the bridge—an important item in the eyes of the city tax-payers, who were footing most of the cost. However, all the piers and docks lay in the basin above Front Street, and a constant stream of shipping was passing the location of the bridge. This meant that the narrow channel could not be closed for the leaves of the draw

span to be erected in the usual manner on falsework. The shipping interests, through the War Department, saw to that. Their bottoms must not be converted into barnacle farms while a mob of dirty-faced steel workers cluttered up the river with four hundred tons of red iron for several weeks. Oh, no. Each leaf of the draw span must be put in place and raised out of the way of navigation in forty-eight hours.

The draw was of the familiar type known as the double-leaf trunnion bascule. Two separate spans or leaves swung vertically on their axes to allow passage of boats. Riley's plan was to erect a leaf on a barge at the unloading docks up in the basin. Then it was a simple matter to float the span down the river and into position, bolt down its huge trunnions and guy the span vertically to clear navigation. It was a logical plan, but everything had to be exactly right to accomplish the job in the forty-eight hour limit.

The butt, or counterweight end of the leaf would project over the edge of the barge a matter of twenty-five feet. The tip end would be lashed to the barge to prevent the span from up-ending over into the river. Naturally, with this leverage the barge would be tilted far over, thus requiring the butt end to be cribbed up on massive timbers in order for it to clear the front wall of the bascule pier.

Riley had figured displacement, leverage, tides and height of cribbing to an inch. On paper the proposition checked. He had floated in fixed spans many times, and anticipated no particular difficulties floating in these bascule leaves. Fair weather and little wind was all he asked.

FOR the next two weeks work progressed smoothly. Rogers had finished his excavation and was now driving the foundation piles. The erection of the first leaf on the barge was nearing completion.

Then arrived another letter from Mr. Grimsby. In no uncertain language he informed Riley he was still worried over the bascule span and that he would be on hand to personally see that nothing went wrong when the leaves were set. Riley merely snorted and went on with his preparations. Two days later H. P. Grimsby arrived.

Horace P. Grimsby was a tall, red-headed, horse-faced, cadaverous looking individual. Not much to look at, true, but his sharp gray eyes missed nothing that occurred on a construction project, nor overlooked anything that might add an extra dollar to the coffers of the Yorktown Bridge and Iron Works.

"Everything okay, Mr. Batchelor?" he inquired, tossing a pill down his throat, much in the manner of a rich man tossing largess to a cadging relative.

"Seems to be so far. About everybody connected with the State Highway Commission is here, and *they* haven't found anything to beef about. This is the first bascule span they've had constructed, you know, and they're cluttering up the job to find out what it's all about. Damned nuisances too. What are those pills for?"

"Indigestion. You ever have it?" asked Mr. Grimsby hopefully.

"Never," replied Riley cordially.

"Well, you ought to," said the other sourly. "When do you plan to float in the first leaf?"

"At high tide tomorrow afternoon. Two o'clock. I've notified navigation authorities and got their permission to go ahead. Everything is ready."

"Fine. I hope to hell nothing goes wrong."

"Be no trouble at all," said Riley confidently. Neverthelesss, his rest that night was troubled with nightmares of bascule leaves snapping their lashings and sliding into the river. He awoke to a new day—a day that was bright and hot—too hot.

WHEN an important or out of the ordinary operation of a construction project is underway a sort of routine wrath descends on all the superintendents, foremen, straw bosses or what have you in charge of it.

Thus, Mr. Grimsby was clicking his false teeth and muttering something about stresses and wind pressure. Riley was ranting on the bascule pier. Mr. Hurley was swearing at the water boy, while down in the oily sound-filled engine room of the derrick barge over which he presided, the engineer was threatening to eviscerate his fireman and use his liver for catfish bait.

Slowly, the barge, with the leaf rearing fearsomely over the side was rooted into

position in front of the pier by a couple of snorting tugs. Mooring cables were hooked to previously prepared anchorages. The derrick boom dipped down and the falls were secured to a cable around the trunnion girder. Steam spurted from the Lambert's exhaust as the engineer opened the throttle and the winches began revolving. Carefully, the big span was eased into the opening between the sides of the pier. One foot—two—five—ten—twenty feet. Riley began breathing normally again—nothing to it. Then came a jarring impact. The span stopped, shuddering, the trunnions lacking two inches of being over their bearings.

"What's wrong, Hurley?" called Riley to the straw boss, who was down in the counterweight pit of the pier to see that everything was kept in the clear.

"Butt ends of both main girders jammed against the walkway at the back of the pit," answered Hurley in a flat, strained voice.

"Holy hell!" Riley paled as understanding struck him. "Jammed solid?"

"That they are," reiterated the straw boss doggedly.

Swearing whole-heartedly, Riley jumped down to the walkway for a personal examination.

Up on the roadway of the adjacent span various high officials of the State Highway Commission peered furtively at one another and wondered who was the daddy of this prize boner in this, the most exacting of professions.

"Get the plans," ordered the resident engineer, Fisher, by name.

"Plans, hell!" snorted Riley, scrambling up over the curtain wall to the roadway. "You don't need plans to see what's wrong. I told you a month ago, Mr. Fisher, that the dimensions for this walkway didn't look right to me, and I asked you at the time to check up on them. Now, didn't I?"

"Yes. But the plans plainly call for a walkway two feet, eight inches wide," argued the engineer, pointing to the figures on the blueprint.

"And two feet three inches is what was intended," supplemented Riley, fixing the chief draughtsman of the Highway Commission with a cold, accusing look. "That would have put us over the trunnion bearings and given us a clearance of three inches."

"Keep a careful check of what this mistake is costing us, Mr. Batchelor," ordered Mr. Grimsby. "The State's going to pay plenty for it. Why, by ged, we stand to lose"—reaching for pencil and notebook—"we stand to lose—"

"We stand to lose the whole damned span if we don't do something right away," interrupted Riley, glancing at the sky, which had begun to take on a yellowish cast. "There's a storm on the way if I'm any weather prophet."

AS IF to bear out his words the wind suddenly freshened and began blowing in fitful gusts. "There's only one thing to do," resumed Riley. "Mr. Hurley, break out all the jackhammers and hand drills on the job. Get the air compressor down here and take six inches off the edge of the walkway down to the bottom of the pit. That'll give us all the clearance we need."

"Here, here, you can't do that," broke in Scott, chief bridge engineer of the Commission, in an effort to maintain his pompous authority.

"Who the hell says I can't?" bayed Riley, loosening his collar and preparing to debate the subject. "If that snivel-snouted, snotty-nosed, lame-brained chief draughtsman of yours had kept his mind on his business and if you'd checked his figures as you were supposed to do this wouldn't have happened."

Strong words to use to a chief bridge engineer but Riley was past the stage where he cared for what he said.

"We'll have to investigate this first and find out how the mistake occurred," asserted Scott.

"Investigate the devil!" snapped Riley, banging on the top of a tool box with a short length of one-inch pipe. "You already know where the bull is. I've got fifty thousand dollars worth of red iron tied up down there. Wind's rising. It'd get me before I could get half way back to the erecting dock. But if you'll accept the responsibility I'll try it and you can investigate until you're black in the face."

Mr. Scott dubiously eyed the flailing piece of pipe, and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well. Go ahead," he surrendered

huffily, and marched over to his luckless chief draughtsman to utter scathing words to him.

"Strong character, that Batchelor," muttered H. P. Grimsby approvingly, gulping a dyspepsia tablet.

Long before the thunderous cacophony of the jackhammers began the tide had turned, and more trouble was added to the steel-workers' burden. The trunnions must be kept clear of their bearings in order for them to seat properly when the obstructing concrete had been cleared away. Riley had figured the rise of the tide as an aid in floating in the leaf, but with the tide falling the shoe was on the other foot. This meant that for every inch the tide fell the span had to be jacked up an inch. While one crew pounded away at the concrete another raced desperately with the outrushing tide to keep the trunnions in the clear. It was back-breaking work with the big jacks and the heavy cribbing timbers. Jack up—block up—jack down—block up the jack—then jack up again. An endless job.

NEARING sundown, the storm, which had been brewing for hours up in the flatwoods, came creeping down the river like a midnight assassin and pounced on Wellington in all its black fury. The wind whistled through the spider web lacing of the steel; it snatched up loose boards and hurled them in every direction; it howled down the streets and lashed the treetops in Riverside Park into a frenzy of tossing branches. The weathercock on the tower of Market House was spinning like a whirling dervish. While over on Baird's Beach across the river, the umbrella shaped roof of the dancing pavilion went sailing out into the water like some monstrous bird of prehistoric days.

Interested spectators scuttled precipitately for shelter from the tempest, but for the toiling bridgemen there was little shelter and no rest at all. In an emergency such as this they all worked the harder. In the glare of hastily rigged acetylene and electric lights they reminded one of lesser demons toiling in the Pit. Jack up—block up—jack down. Shoulders vibrating from the impact of the chattering jack-hammers. Other men, their shirts discarded, swung ten-pound hammers at the heads of the hand drills. A giant negro from the bull gang rhythmically swung his hammer. Above the roar of the storm and the clatter of hammers his voice arose, melodious and clear, singing the words of the steel driver's song—a song that has spun steel across mighty rivers, tunneled mountains and flung railroads to the far reaches of the earth: John Henry.

"John Henry had a little hammer.
(wham)
Handle was made of bone. *(wham)*
Every time he hit the drill on the head
(wham)
His hammer would ring on the red hot stone." *(wham)*

The whine of the wind took on a higher note. The water tank and tower atop Simon Rosenthal's department store crashed to the street below and reduced a stranded motor car to a shapeless pile of junk. The tin covered roof of McAllister's warehouse began disappearing in sheets. Chimneys were toppling here and there. From up the river came the hoarse blatting of an ocean going tug.

Riley turned and peered toward the sound through the stinging sheets of spray, and a cry of horror burst from his lips. Everybody in the clear!" he yelled.

When bridgemen hear that cry they do not stop to figure the order of their going. They go, each hunting a place which instinct tells him means personal safety. Thus the bascule pit spewed men like a man does wine when he has had too much of it. Only when they reached the comparative safety of the roadway did they stop to investigate the cause of their flight.

Down the river came spinning a lighter loaded with lumber, a tug hotly pursuing it and making futile attempts at its recapture. Evidently, the lighter had broken loose from its moorings and, now, like a juggernaut of doom, it was headed directly for the steel laden barge. It struck a cluster of fender piling, hesitated momentarily and swung toward the barge. While the frantic bridgemen cursed in frenzied impotence, it struck. The big barge surged and shuddered under the impact; the tautened mooring cables hummed angrily. A mooring bit gave way with a ripping crash, and the

barge shifted downstream a few feet, slightly twisting the bascule span askew.

Riley watched with dull apathy, momentarily expecting the remaining cables to break, freeing the barge and dragging the span into the river. Still the humming cables held. A Diesel-motored tug came snicker-chucking around the back of the pier and drew up beside the lighter. While deck hands skilfully fended off the tugs from the plunging lighter, lines were quickly made fast, and with a furious jangling of bells both tugs settled their sterns low in the water and began easing their unruly charge toward the shelter of the Seaboard docks.

THE tense nerved bridgemen began to return to a condition approaching normalcy. Riley shook a furious fist after the disappearing lighter and volleyed orders. Other mooring cables were run; the clatter of hammers began anew; the men on the jacks resumed their endless toil. The storm as if baffled at the escape of a prey redoubled its fury.

"Hurley," bawled Riley above the racket, "put on your ten-cent store spectacles and see if this barge's leakin'."

Hurley caught up a lantern and disappeared down a hatch. Within a few minutes he reappeared and walked over to Riley.

"She's leaking like a sieve," he reported. "I doubt if she'll last an hour."

Riley's heart sank. The fates seemed to be against the toiling steelworkers. One danger was escaped only to be faced by a worse. He seethed with helpless fury as he whirled toward Hurley.

"We're not licked yet!" he howled. "Run jet lines from the derrick. Get every pump we have on the job to this barge."

Within fifteen minutes a dozen streams of water were pouring out of the barge in as many places. The men working the jacks had been withdrawn to man the pumps.

"How long, Lord, how long?" tonelessly sang one of the pumpers. "The jacks were bad but dam'f this ain't worse."

"Trunnions resting on the bearing supports, Mr. Batchelor," reported Mr. Hurley a short while later.

"Let 'em roost," retorted Riley grimly. "If we can keep the water from gaining on us until high tide we're safe—unless another loose lighter comes sailing down. Better take another look at the water in the hold."

"We seem to be holding our own. Can't tell for certain," reported Hurley after a lengthy examination.

"That's good. Send Cox over here."

The timekeeper came clambering over a pile of floor stringers, the tails of his raincoat making whiplike reports in the wind. Water cascaded from his hat as he bent his head to enter the scant shelter offered by one of the main girders.

"Cox," directed Riley. "Take this key

to my locker and bring over a half a dozen bottles of skull-bust. These men have got to have a stimulant if they're to last. Remember, now, I know exactly how many bottles I have left, so mind you don't snaffle one for your own use. After you get back with them, hustle up to that Greek philosopher's cafe and have him cook up a

bushel or two of sandwiches and a tub of coffee. Also hire any men you can find with guts enough to work in this storm. Get going."

With the heartening return of Cox with the liquor, and later with coffee and sandwiches, the men on the pumps increased the tempo of their strokes.

NEARING nine o'clock, the tide changed and began slowly coming in. High tide would occur around three in the morning. At midnight the men clearing away the concrete reported everything ready, and Riley sent them to relieve the hard pressed men on the pumps. Then, for the first time in hours, he permitted himself to relax and look around more clearly.

"Cox!" he shouted. "Where did Mr. Grimsby get to?"

"He's in the office drinking your whiskey and figuring how much he's going to soak the State for that bull on the concrete."

"Oh, he is, is he?" snorted Mr. Batchelor. "Well, you just run in a dead man on the payroll this week. H. P. doesn't know it, but the Yorktown Bridge and Iron Works are paying for the liquor consumed on this job tonight." He brooded a moment. "That's just like the old devil —sneak off when anything like this comes up, so he'll have his pants clean if anything goes wrong."

By one o'clock the wind had lessened somewhat, but the rain continued in gusty squalls. The tide, bucking the adverse wind, was rising all too slowly to suit Riley. An hour later he was convinced it would rise no higher. The trunnions were still resting on the bearing supports, lacking about twelve inches of being high enough to clear the bearings when the span should be moved to its proper place.

"Time to go," he decided. Swiftly he directed the men to their appointed places. "All right, Chief," he called to the engineer, his right hand raised, while the extended forefinger made queer circling motions. "Get up on your load line."

The winches of the Lambert started revolving. The nose of the derrick barge began to sink while the stern rose. Almost imperceptibly the trunnions lifted. One inch —two—three—four. The exhaust of the Lambert slowed—became labored—stopped.

"Just two more inches, Chief," begged Riley. But the engineer had dogged off. He came out through the door of the engine room and gazed aloft at the straining boom. He spat overside and looked up at Riley.

"How many did you say, Cap'n?"

"Two inches, Chief. Only two."

Dubiously, the engineer gazed again at the boom, and shook his head. "Two it is," he acknowledged. "But it'll just about tear the guts out'n her."

ONCE more the labored exhaust of the engine thudded out on the damp air. To Riley, tensely watching the agonizingly slow rise of the trunnions, it seemed to take a century before the final two inches were covered. Suddenly, the trunnions slid over their bearings just as a terrific burst of escaping steam and heart-filled profanity came from the engine room. The trunnions settled into place on their bearings with a rumbling jar.

"Told you it meant her guts!" shouted the engineer, shaking a furious fist at the span. He loved his derrick, did that man.

"That's all right, Chief," soothed Riley. "You made it on that last heave. What happened?"

"Cylinder head packin' blowed."

"Repack it at once. We'll need the derrick to raise the leaf. All right, devils, we're safe. Put in the anchor bolts and get the cribbing out of the way."

In the misty light of the rain driven dawn the last cable clamp on the guy wires was tightened and the last weary bridgeman had departed when Riley took a final look around and headed for the office.

H. P. Grimsby came lurching through the door and gazed with blinking, bloodshot eyes at the tip of the span rearing high about the racing waters of the muddy Wellington.

"Well, we cern'ly did it, didn't we, old boy?" he chuckled.

"Sure," replied Riley, waving a careless hand. "Nothing to it."

And though the rumbling sound he heard was only a street car beginning its early morning rounds, he wondered if it wasn't Ananias turning over in his grave.

There Is a Mystery—and a Murder—for the Sheriff of Las Animas to Solve About That Particular Shirt

THE PURPLE SHIRT

By ROBERT CARSE

"LOTS o' business, huh, Jack?" asked the squint-eyed barkeep of the Three Roses, leaning over the slick mahagony of the bar.

"Uh, huh!" grunted Jack Brady, gray-headed sheriff of Las Animas, and sipped again from his beer. "Pay night for the boys is always one bundle o' hell fer this town." He took another bite from his cheese sandwich and looked quickly down the long bar. "Couple o' them H Bar Y boys'll be seein' the outside from the inside soon—"

He stopped abruptly, swung around toward the door, hands free from his glass and food. The swinging door cracked back. A small and wide-eyed man came swiftly in, high boot-heels creaking. For a moment, right inside the smoke-hazy room, the newcomer paused, then, seeing the tall, solemn sheriff, came at once over to him.

"Howdy-do, Flip?"

"*Buenos noches,* Jack." The newcomer turned to the squint-eyed one behind the bar. "Give us one o' yer small headaches." As soon as the barkeep had moved away to fill the order, "Jack, some hombre's just drilled Tom Younger!"

"Where?"

"Down to his an' George's shack."

"When, yuh got any idea?"

"Naw, I jest found him—an' come here pronto fer you."

"Huh. Yuh ain't seen George?"

"No, I ain't seen George."

"Huh. Stay here an' drink yer drink. An' sing low, will yuh, Flip?"

"That's right, Jack."

The sheriff flipped a quarter onto the wet wood of the bar; slanted out the wide, swinging doors. Outside, he halted, looking up and down the light-splashed, hectic street. Las Animas was a border cowtown and it was pay night for almost all the stock outfits in the valley. Since sundown big Jack Brady, a quiet and efficient man, had had his hands about full. For, since early afternoon, the arid punchers and foremen had been riding in, looking for their monthly bundle o' hell. Already more than one over-enthusiastic cowpoke had been shown the shortest distance between two points, a barroom and the town hoosegow, by Brady.

NOW the tall sheriff lounged at a slow, careful pace down the wide, dusty street, shooting hand not very far removed from his low-slung .45 butt. At the hitch-racks stood row after row of sweat-streaked range horses. From the honky-tonks and bars came the jar and clamor of mechanical pianos and banjos, the hoarse shouts and high, metallic laughs of punchers and bright-eyed dance-hall girls. Here and there, in the flickering maze of lights and shadows in the broad well of the street, lurched the dark figures of very drunken cowboys, already seeking the air and their horses after several hours of highly concentrated hell-raising in the dives lining the street.

The tall sheriff kept on steadily past these lurching gentlemen, but with a searching, keen glance for each one of them. Six months before, in a barroom battle, he had been forced to kill a booze-crazed kid riding for the H Bar Y outfit, and, when drunk, some of the H Bar Y boys still resented that killing. But Brady was an old and respected citizen, himself a big bundle of bad news for the men who chose to tangle horns with him. He kept on down the street in silence, nodding now and again to the muttered "howdy's" of the punchers.

His way took him to the railroad siding, the big, shabby, red water tank and the stock corral. Across the grit and cinders of the siding, stepping thoughtfully over the dull-gleaming rails, Brady's mind, a slow thinking but sharply analytical one, was already preoccupied with the work that lay before him.

Tom Younger, known up and down the valley as a hard drinker and harder worker, had been murdered. How, and by whom?

Tom's partner, George Faegner, had not been seen all day.

The man who had reported the crime to him, Flip Murchison, was the proprietor of Las Animas's most flourishing general store; had, in years past, backed and outfitted Younger and Faegner, in several of their prospecting trips. Recently the pair had returned to Las Animas after a six-months' trip in the Lost River Valley country. General report had it that they had struck about five thousand in dust; had brought it back with them; repaid Murchison, and settled down to spend the balance.

But where was the dead man's partner; and why had Murchison, a prosperous business man, sought out the pair in their tumbled shack in this part of the Mexican quarter late on a Saturday night?

SKIRTING several quaintly displayed heaps of tin cans, garbage and general junk, Brady came at last to the door of a small shack wherein burned a dim light and at the door of which stood half a dozen curious Mexicans. They gaped up at the tall, solemn sheriff and one, an old, gnarled fellow who had once ridden as Brady's deputy in the old, bad days, grunted a respectful, "Allo, Boss!"

"Anybody been inside here, Tonio?"

"Not since Murchison leave; no."

"How long ago was that?"

" 'Bout half hour."

"How long was he here?"

"Dunno, Boss."

"Any of them hear a shot, Tonio?"

"Sure—lots shots. Hard to tell, though, Boss. Lots hell uptown; mebbe one o' them, *si?*"

"Huh. Tell them *'vamose pronto,'* Tonio."

"Yes, Boss."

The old man turned on the gaping gallery.

"Vamose! Vamose!" he screeched. "Get to hell outa, *bobos!*"

Strangely awed by the old man's sudden

return to the eminence of an upholder of the law, the gallery fled. Swiftly, Brady entered the place. It was a small one-room affair. Sprawled stiff in death in the center of it, seated sidewise in a battered box-chair was Tom Younger, a brown rust of dried blood down his brown face, a ragged black hole in the center of his lined forehead. Jack Brady, sheriff of Las Animas, cursed; this dead man in the chair had long been a close and warm friend of his. Then he wheeled around. Tonio lounged outside the doorway, back to him. Brady, grinning grimly, shut the door, jerked up a couple of old burlap sacks from a corner and thoroughly covered the windows.

Then, walking with swift caution, he crossed to the smoke-blackened kerosene lantern hanging on a nail above the small stove and turned up the wick. He paused for a moment, clicking a broad thumb-nail against his tobacco-yellowed teeth, went to his hands and knees and examined the floor carefully.

THE dusty place was a maze of tracks, from which he could make nothing. But behind the tar-paper of the far wall, imbedded in the 'dobe, he found the flattened slug that had killed Tom Younger. It was a .45 slug, and one fired at close range. Tom Younger, then, had been killed at close range—not by a stray bullet fired by some drunken cowpoke offering a wild and promiscuous salute on his way out of town. No, there was no question about that; Younger had been murdered, and by a man firing purposely to kill.

The course of the bullet, the neat hole in the forehead, the terrible wreckage of the back of the skull showed that. But how about a motive? Younger had been well known and liked, as was his missing partner, George Faegner. The two had lived here between their sporadic, and usually unsuccessful, prospecting trips for years. He himself, and Flip Murchison, had been the two men's best friends. That Murchison, for any motive whatsoever, had done the crime he seriously doubted. The same for the missing Faegner, who had been the dead man's partner for almost twenty years. But who, then? And how about the dust the two were reported to have brought back from the Lost River Valley country?

Systematically, big Brady turned the place upside down. And, buried in the soft earth beneath the tin sheathing and the rotted wood of the floor, the sheriff found a tin box full of gold dust and nuggets—approximately a thousand dollars' worth, he estimated. About all that the improvident two would now have left after repaying the store-owner, Murchison, the advances he had made them and living this comparative life of luxury for a month or so.

No greed motive then. And the killer had either been unaware of the presence of the dust, or unwilling to take it. Sort of a puzzler. Big Brady was no particularly keen sleuth and now admitted himself frankly puzzled. Jerking off a fresh chew with his powerful teeth, his eyes were attracted by a bright object which had hitherto not aroused his curiosity. Quickly he stepped around the chair which still held the stiffly akimbo form of the dead man and picked it up. It was a brilliant purple-colored flannel shirt, almost brand new.

That it had been worn at least once Brady could tell by the dark sweat stain still evident on the collar lining. The sheriff cursed wonderingly. This was the kind of thing a young and gay-minded cowpoke would pick out for a rodeo outfit; not what old-timers like the dead man or his partner, Faegner, would wear. The two had always been more or less notorious, no matter what the condition of their finances, for their careless attitude toward matters of dress. Rum, food, tobacco, cards, sleep and an occasional smiling glance from one of the honkytonk girls was all that the two had ever been known to care for. Not biliously brilliant purple shirts.

BRADY held the thing closer to the light and examined the label. Three Mountain Sterling brand. Flip Murchison, he remembered immediately, handled this brand of stuff. Flip, then, who did his own clerking in the store, must know of the sale of it —and who had bought it. But why hadn't the little man spoken of it when he had come to tell him of the murder? Questions, especially mental ones, irritated the big sheriff of Las Animas; he dropped the gaudy object to the floor, crossed to the door and went out into the night.

Old Antonio still crouched by the door, like a weary but still faithful dog.

"Tonio, *muchacho!*" growled Brady.

The old man leaped up, coming out of his sleepy doze.

"W'at you have, Boss?"

Brady grinned briefly, grimly.

"I want fer you to keep awake an' not let any hombre in this place. Yuh do, I'll make yuh support yer woman! Savvy?"

The old man shuddered and became wide-awake at thought of any such penance.

"You bettem, Boss!" he cackled earnestly.

Brady nodded silently, and swung away toward the siding and the main street, bound on finding both Flip Murchison and the dead man's missing partner, George Faegner, also a little information about the purple shirt. But two blocks up the street from the railroad siding, his course was interrupted.

Two drunkenly sportive cowpokes had emerged from a honkytonk, a crowd of enthusiastic watchers at their heels, to put on a wrestling bout. Ears, hair, best clothes and flesh had been swiftly and badly torn in the encounter. Play had given way to blows, gouging elbows and curses. Just as Brady shouldered through the already nervous crowd one of the lads went for his gun. Brady clipped him full and flush on the jaw. Then he gave the other bow-legged youth a large sample of the same dose.

SUMMARILY recruiting several volunteers from the crowd, he had the unconscious two lugged to the town hoosegow. In the front room he divested the still groggy gentlemen of their gunbelts and spurs, then pitched them without ceremony into one large cell, where already half a dozen of their predecessors were sleeping with uncomfortable zeal. Cursing the town council whose niggardliness denied him the services of a regular deputy, he returned to the front room.

His drafted assistants had already fled the place, themselves considerably sobered. Brady allowed himself another of his grim smiles and took from a drawer of his desk a pair of handcuffs. These he slipped into a hip pocket of his trousers. He then went steadily across the street and into the Three Roses bar, looking for Flip Murchison.

He found him at the other end of the bar, solitary and quite drunk. Brady's broad fingers tightened about the little store-owner's soft shoulder tendons and he led him to a deserted table in the rear of the big place, some distance from the convivials and card players.

"Flip," he asked slowly, "did them two owe yuh any money?"

Murchison, suddenly and shakingly sober, shuddered in negation.

"No, Jack. Paid in full when they come back from Lost River."

"What took yuh to their shack tonight, then?"

Murchisin licked his dry lips with a thick tongue.

"Wanted them to go back and take another crack at Lost River. Wanted to see them, an' me, make some more jack outa it. Tradin' ain't so good as it might be in this shake-down now. An' you know Faegner an' —an' *knew* Younger; lazier'n a couple o' burros."

"Huh!" Brady rolled himself a rice-paper cigarette, pushed over the makings and matches to Murchison. "Flip," he asked gravely, "did yuh see a purple shirt on the floor when yuh was there?"

Murchison's still open cigarette paper fluttered a bit in nervous fingers, spilling grains of tobacco to the scarred table-top.

"What—what kind o' shirt, Jack?"

"Flannel. Purple color. Bright's hell."

"No, I didn't see no such shirt when I was there, Jack." The man's bright eyes lifted steadily to the sheriff's. "But this mornin', early, I sold one like o' that to George Faegner."

"Huh," said the sheriff of Las Animas cryptically. "Only one yuh had, Flip?"

"Only one I had, Jack."

"Anythin'—peculiar about his buyin' it?"

"Nothin', 'cept that George was drunk as a senator, an' that ain't peculiar!"

BRADY shook his gray head.

"He say anythin' when he bought it?"

"Yeah—somethin' about he always wanted him a shirt like that, an' now, by heck an' green apples, he was gonna have it."

"Put it on in the store?"

"Yeah. An' left one behind that I had t' darn near pry offen the floor!"

"Anyone else in the store at the time?"

"Yeah, Kiyoh Reedon of the QU. Him an' George had been rum-battlin' all night;

they just made Kiyoh straw boss over to his outfit."

"Kiyoh say anything peculiar about it?"

"Naw, nothin' peculiar, only that George looked like— Hell, Jack, I fergot. He kidded him plenty about it."

"Yeah? How'd George take it."

"Didn't. Told Kiyoh if he didn't shut his head he'd put his foot down it. Kiyoh laughed an' laughed an' they went out fer a drink. But wasn't you here, Jack?"

"Naw. Over to Bing Levy's about that sheep shootin'. Didn't get back till noon. Yuh didn't see George after that, huh?"

"I didn't; naw, Jack. But I heard they kidded him plenty more when they was drinkin'."

"An' he took it the same way he took Kiyoh's talk?"

"Yeah, so they tell, Jack. George was kinda mean-drunk then. Not that he ever gets much thataway."

"Where was they drinkin' after George Kiyoh left yer joint?"

"Lanky Lewis's—mostly. I didn't see, Jack, but guys come in the store an' talk."

"That's right." Brady rose slowly up, a grave and commanding figure in that smoke-filled and noisy room. For a moment he looked searchingly down at the man seated at the table. "Flip," he said softly, "kinda hang around close to town tonight and tomorrow, will yuh?"

Murchison's liquor-bright eyes went wide with wonder and a little fear.

"Sure, sure, Jack!"

"So long, Flip."

"S'—s' long, Jack."

GAPING, he watched the big man push good-naturedly through the boisterous Three Roses crowd and out the door. Then, lifting the half-filled glass he had brought from the bar with him, he drank it.

"Wha'—wha' the hell he want with me?" he muttered thickly aloud. "I didn't drill Tom Younger!"

In the street the long-legged sheriff kept to the wooden sidewalk, stepping swiftly toward Lanky Lewis's place, a few doors down the street from the bar he had just left. Suddenly he halted, spun around, hand clamping down on his gun. Across the street, in the shadows of a low store porch roof, he had seen the flash of swift moving metal.

"Yo', Jack Brady," called a savage, whiskey-husky voice. "Yo', short-horn, I'm on the prod for yo'!"

The sheriff of Las Animas knew that voice and its owner. It was a young Texan puncher, partner of the drunken H Bar Y lad he had been forced to kill six months before. This lad, here, had been almost constantly liquored since, had sworn openly and repeatedly that he would kill Brady in payment for his partner's death.

HE CAME lurching now into the shift-light and shadow of the street. A light beam fell yellowly across his body, and the old sheriff made out the ruddy, strained face, the glaring eyes and blue-black metal of the gun. That muzzle wavered up, began to come down swiftly, from the hip, Jack Brady shot—twice. The H Bar Y's Texas bad man spun on a varnished heel, reeled, fired into the dust, slipped sidewise and to his face.

Men, screaming girls, came running. They found somber Jack Brady above the wounded man, slipping two fresh shells into his gun. Three of the older and more sober men picked up the Texas lad and carried him to the jail; another plowed off hurriedly down the wide, dusty street for the town doctor.

That stoical individual probed the two slugs loose from the shattered right arm, cleaned and bandaged the wound. On a clean mattress and covered with a clean blanket, the former bad man was placed in a single cell of the almost-full jail. Brady shooed out all the curious ones and the doctor, and again locked the door and went wordlessly on down the street, once more in search of men who knew anything about George Faegner and his purchase of a purple shirt.

In a rear corner of Lanky Lewis's big

place Brady found Kiyoh Reedon, lying where a commercially-minded dance-hall girl had pushed him. A master of the art, it did not take the gray-headed sheriff more than five minutes to shake the QU's newly made straw boss into a comparative state of sensibility. He then propped him on a chair placed against the wall.

"Yuh was drinkin' with George Faegner last night and this mornin', Kiyoh?"

" 'At's right, Jack! Them damn' miners'll made a drunkard outa me yet!"

The sheriff nodded, to show he had no doubt that Kiyoh would eventually by fair means or borrowed money, become a drunkard.

"Yuh was with him when he bought him a shirt over to Flip Murchison's place?"

" 'At's—'at's right, Jack!"

"You kid him about it, Kiyoh?"

"Yep, 'at's right! Hu-up—hup!"

"What'd he say?"

"Lotsa—lotsa things. Didn't like it. S-said the next man who said that, he'd—he'd sh-sh-shoot 'm!"

"Was he serious?"

"S-s-serious drunk."

"Huh. Many guys say that to him?"

"Thr-three-four. All the same."

"Where'd he head when he left yuh-all?"

"H-home, Jack."

"Drunk, huh?"

"He—he wasn't ridin' no bicycle!"

"Huh. Sleep it off, Kiyoh."

"I—I can't walk," muttered Kiyoh cogently, and, to prove it, rolled off the chair and onto his face on the floor. Brady patiently pushed him over on his back and left him there. Then swiftly he walked toward the front door, a dark look of wonder, and of fear, in his eyes, for he was given to believe that his friend of ten years had just—

"Boss! Boss! *Valgame dios,* I run myself cock-eye!"

IT WAS the wild-eyed Tonio, bobbing through the dancing couples like a shuttle in a loom. With a jerk of his head Brady indicated that his temporary deputy contain himself until they were outside. There Tonio clutched wildly at his arm.

"Him," he cracked hoarsely, "him is there!"

"Who?" barked Brady,

"Faegner! *El muerto's* partnair!"

For answer, Brady lurched off down the street at the clumsy run common to a man that has spent over half his life in the saddle. With the ragged *slap-slap-slap* of Tonio's laboring feet behind him, Brady raced across the sliding tracks, past the sprawled blue shadow of the water tank and down the junk-mazed main path of the Mexican quarter. One of the burlap sacks he himself had stretched across a window in the shack had fallen down. Through it, staring wide-eyed, he could make out the dark, unmistakable form of George Faegner.

Fingers loosely gripped about the smooth butt of his .45, Jack Brady kicked back the door of that shack and entered. Faegner, a small, slight man with almost colorless eyes and a quivering gash of a mouth, looked for a moment stupidly at the other.

JACK BRADY'S probing eyes swung to those of the miner, then to the stiffly awkward dead man in the chair.

"George," he asked in a forcedly calm voice, "yuh know who killed yer pardner?"

Faegner's hands clutched under the faded bib of his tattered overalls, moved a bit.

"Year, I do."

"Huh. Where yuh been all day, George?"

"Lanky Lewis's barn, sleepin'."

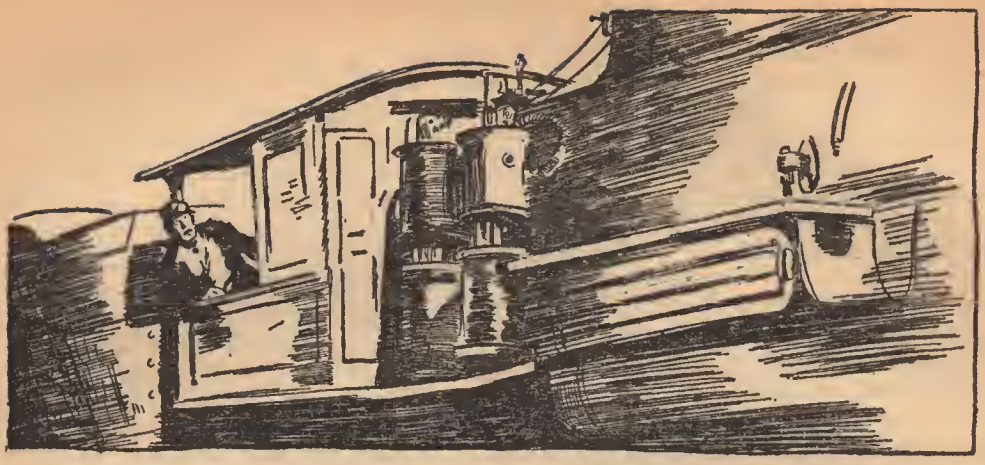
"Who drilled Tom?"

"Jack," husked the little, dazed man, slowly, "I swore me this mornin' that I'd drill the next guy who—"

"Yuh mean," asked Brady very slowly, "that yuh shot yer pardner because he kidded yuh about a purple shirt?"

As he spoke, he swung on the other, gun in hand, the other clawing toward Faegner's hands under that faded overall bib. He was a split second too late. Faegner's thumb had tightened on the hammer of the gun held there. Even as the sheriff caught at him, the little man fell forward, blood outspouting from the terrible wound in his throat and jaw.

Five minutes later, still shaking uncontrollably from head to foot, Jack Brady, sheriff of Las Animas, laid the two partners side by side. Then, knowing nothing better to do, he covered both their faces with the purple shirt.



THE ENGINE BUSTER

By CLIFFORD KNIGHT

SLIM TALBOT left the employ of the Great Southwestern Railroad at Redrock. He left it violently. In fact he was only about two inches ahead of the heavy toe of Craig Schultz's foot; and Craig Schultz's foot was big and he swung it fast. Which indicates two things; first, that Slim Talbot was unusually agile in his movements, second that, when Craig Schultz, road foreman of engines for the G. S.-W., swung that foot of his, the man he swung it at was all washed up with the railroad. He was through, fired, canned, kicked out literally as well as physically. And that is just what Slim Talbot was, and nothing else.

"You big bum," yelled Slim, turning to shake his fist as Schultz still standing in the gangway of the locomotive which up until now had had one perfectly good fireman in the person of the discharged Slim, "you can't fire me like that!"

"You're fired, ain't you?" yelled back Schultz above the sound of the droning pops which Slim's skillful labors had brought into being. "And you'll stay fired. You're not going to bust up any more engines for me. Not if I know it. You're through." Slim's tin box came hurtling through the air, propelled by Schultz's mighty arm. And Slim Talbot, who had a hot retort on the tip of his tongue for Schultz, was obliged instead to concentrate on the flying tin box. He froze to it, swung wide and crashed into the side of the Redrock depot, the crowd of interested idlers scattering from his flailing arms and legs.

Slim Talbot Played His Hunch, and Found How It Felt to Be the Chestnut the Cat Pulled Out of the Fire.

And then the argument was over. For Schultz had in the meantime ordered the hoghead from his seat and taken it himself. Schultz cracked the throttle, and the hoghead moved over to the left-hand side of the cab. The Limited pulled out of Redrock, and Slim Talbot was abandoned as far as G. S.-W. was concerned. He could have gone back

and ridden the cushions to the terminal at Whitby, but he didn't.

"Here, sister," said Slim to a slight brown-eyed girl who was returning to the telegraph office from the Limited's baggage car, where she had gone to get the railroad mail, "you can have this." He extended the heavy box towards her The girl refused it.

"I don't want it," she said a bit stiffly. A few in the interested crowd grinned at that and edged closer.

"Neither do I," said Slim. "I'm through. They canned me."

"So I noticed," said the girl, a faint smile coming to her lips.

"Can I set it inside your office? It's got my good coat and pants in it, but I guess they ain't anything to dress up for here at Redrock."

"You can put it in the office," said the girl, and led the way.

"Are you the operator here, sister?" asked Slim as he set the box in a corner of the office of the tiny station.

"Yes."

"Well, if anybody gets curious as to me, just tell 'em I took out across country." His blue eyes twinkled and he grinned. He stood a moment, then ran a hard right hand through the blond lock of hair that had come down upon his forehead, and departed.

FOR more than a hundred miles after it leaves its terminal at Whitby, the Cactus Division of the G. S.-W. Railroad winds and twists through a God-forsaken region that is all bad lands. Dry arroyos, rocky canyons, narrow little gorges that seem no wider than city alleys, overgrown with cactus and stunted pine, thread their tortuous way through the broken landscape. And in and out of these, as though through a labyrinth, the Cactus Division creeps and climbs. At rare intervals the roughness smooths out into sufficiently wide valleys to permit a small collection of houses, a few false-front stores and the necessary railroad buildings.

Redrock was one of those rare intervals in this rough region. In the old bad days horse thieves, cattle rustlers, train robbers, outlaws, six-gun men and riffraff holed up in the region secure from sporadic pursuit, but time and dogged, straight-shooting sheriffs and railroad special agents thinned them out.

Slim Talbot turned from the depot towards the Redrock postoffice. The postoffice was no particular objective for him; it was just somewhere to head for now that he had been forcefully divorced from his engine. A dozen men followed in his wake, idlers who had gone to the depot to witness the arrival of the only train that stopped at Redrock. But Slim gave no indication that he was aware of them as he walked the mile to the postoffice housed in a wide false front frame building, one of less than half a dozen that made up what was known as Redrock.

"Any mail for me?" he asked at the window, giving his name.

"No."

"Wasn't expectin' none," he said, grinning. "But I may get some, if I stay long enough. Where does a man get a job around here?"

"Depends," said the postmaster who was also the storekeeper. "Two-three ranches back up in the canyons a piece. If you're a rider."

"Rider? I just got throwed off one of the G. S.-W.'s big mountain jacks down at the depot. I'm an engine buster, but I reckon I could ride anything less."

"Why don't you talk to some of the boys here, then?" said the postmaster, motioning towards the group gathering behind him at the window for the mail.

SLIM TALBOT turned around and beheld at his elbow a short thick man whose face was solid and hard like granite, whose eyes were like small pieces of flint. His features were expressionless, but his eyes were intently studying the ex-fireman whose discharge he had witnessed at the depot. He opened his lips slightly.

"Lookin' for a job?" he asked.

"Yeah, kind of," answered Slim, grinning. "I ain't got none to speak of now."

"Railroad kicked you off, didn't they?" inquired the stranger, a faint hard smile appearing in the corners of his mouth.

"I'll say they did."

"Ever work on a ranch?"

"Yeah. Sure. That's what I done before I took to railroadin'."

"Through with the railroad now, for good, are you?"

"Brother, I have to be," said Slim to the stranger, in whose eyes had kindled a faint glow of interest. Slim noted those eyes.

"My name's Ed Wickert," said the stranger. "I'm the owner of the Lazy S ranch back in the canyon a ways. I'll give you a try, if you think you can make a hand."

"O. K., Ed. My name's Slim Talbot, and I'm rarin' to go."

"I hate to see the damn railroad treat a man the way they done you, Slim."

"You and me both, Ed. If I'd done anything to can me for, all right; but I didn't. The road foreman has had it in for me for months. And today he let me have it."

"Understand, Slim, I ain't takin' you on because the railroad fired you." The granite face hardened. "I ain't sorry for you. It's because I need a hand."

Slim Talbot gazed for a long moment into the flinty eyes of Ed Wickert. "O. K.," he said.

FOR three weeks Slim Talbot made a hand at the Lazy S. The herd on the ranch were fair size. There were five riders, including Wickert, the owner. It was good haying weather and the rich grass in the little spring-fed valley where the Lazy S was located was being cut. At odd times of the day one of the hands, a wild boy from Utah, named Curt Webber, practiced the draw down by the corral. Of the other hands Slim could make little. He studied them all. The owner, Ed Wickert, solid, short of stature and harder than the granite ledges outcropping along the canyon walls, betrayed nothing of what went on in his mind. Sam Winston, long-legged and loose-mouthed about trivial things, was as tight-lipped as a sphinx on things past and future. More than once he surprised Winston studying him. The other man was Pete. He never heard Pete's last name mentioned. The best rider, bar none, Slim Talbot had ever seen, he was the most silent, most stony-faced of the outfit. Of the four of them, Slim came to believe, any one would have cut his throat and gladly, if there was even half a reason to do so.

"Listen, Slim," Ed Wickert said one day at dusk at the end of three weeks, as the two of them sat alone on the corral fence. "I've been lookin' you over, and you'll do. Now get this: you know how to run an engine and that's what I want you to do." It was almost dark, but Slim could see those cold, flinty eyes peering at him through the faint light. "I don't trust no damn hoghead. He might pull something that would blow the works and leave us flappin' loose just when we didn't want it, see? When the train stops you be at the engine, and you and Sam go up in the cab. You run her and the baggage cars down to where Curt and Pete are with the red lantern. We'll do the rest, see?"

FOR a full minute Slim was silent. He looked at those flinty eyes, then away to the dark canyon wall and back again before he replied. "Sure," he answered slowly. "I get you. But you've had me puzzled all this time, though, tryin' to figure out yore racket. Are you the boys that pulled the Scorpion train robbery a year ago?"

"That's ancient history. Forget it," snapped Wickert.

"There was a railroad dick named Cogland that worked on the case. Disappeared somewheres around here, I remember—"

"Listen you—I didn't hire you to do my remembering for me. Are you with us or—?"

The silence was ominous.

"Sure, I'm with you."

"O. K."

LATE in the afternoon three days following, a heavy-bodied, red-faced man rode into the ranch yard at the Lazy S. He had ridden far evidently, for both horse and man were tired. The man took off his heavy Stetson, mopped his face and partly bald head with his bandanna. He nodded to Ed Wickert.

"My name's Johnson," he said. "Cattle trader. I see you got some pretty fair white faces in that herd of yours."

"Yes, some."

"I'm making up a little bunch. Starting a ranch in Willow Canyon near Puddingstone. Like to talk up a deal, if I can."

"Sure," said Wickert, opening his granite lips slightly. "Won't do no harm to talk. The stranger dismounted and sat

beside Wickert on the front steps. The trader and Wickert were still talking when the cook announced supper and the outfit gathered to eat.

That night was dark. Only the faint light of the stars afforded any illumination. The hoofs of two horses thudded in a slow walk along the trail. The forms of the riders were indistinct in the darkness; neither spoke until they were well down the trail from the Lazy S ranchhouse. Finally Slim Talbot pulled up his horse, reaching out and touching the cattle trader's sleeve.

"This is far enough, Mr. Carter, I'd better be going back from here." Slim's voice however was soft and guarded.

The other man was silent, and the silence of the night seemed to draw closer about them as they sat their horses. At length Superintendent Tobe Carter of the Cactus Division of the G. S-W. spoke.

"Slim," he said, "I got your letter, or else I wouldn't be here."

"I reckoned you did," replied Slim.

"And I took this way of coming along like a cattle trader so as to arouse no suspicions. You wasn't expecting me to come at all, I could see. But this here scheme of yours, Slim, is the bunk. You're committing suicide, if you ain't already done it. Schultz told me about what happened at Redrock. By the way, Schultz is back on an engine again. He couldn't cut the mustard as road foreman of engines and he's on his old run again. He said you aggravated him all the way down from Whitby; and he thinks, now that he fired you, that you tormented him on purpose, just to get him to fire you there."

"Sure," said Slim, grinning in the darkness. "For once Schultz figgered right."

"Now, listen here, Slim," said Superintendent Carter seriously. "If you were just any other tallowpot I wouldn't be here talking to you now. It's a damn fool notion you've got and if you were somebody else I'd say to hell with you; you could get out of this by yourself. But your old Dad and me were friends and buddies dating back to the old link and pin days. And I promised him I'd look after you. And I'm going to. You come ride on out with me now. I'm afraid to have you go back to the Lazy S. If ever I sat down among cutthroats, I done it tonight at supper."

"Aw, hell, Mr. Carter," replied Slim softly. "They've swallered it hook, line and sinker, right from the start."

"Maybe so, Slim. But your life ain't worth a nickel if they find out about you. You know what happened to Cogland."

"Sure, I know. But I'm in with them now, ain't I? You saw that this evening."

"Come on, Slim," said Superintendent Carter. "I can't let you stay here. We'll ride on out now. And I'll send somebody up to get those fellows."

"But you can't prove nothing," said Slim. "I know they done the Scorpion job, but they ain't a thing I or anybody else can find that would be evidence. We got to wait and let them pull another job and catch 'em at it. I've had a hunch about this thing all along, and it's workin'. I was lucky from the minute Schultz kicked me off the engine that day, and I always follow my luck."

"It's suicide, Slim. Plum suicide."

"But they think I'm sore at the railroad. And they know I can run an engine. That happens to make me just the guy they want."

"All right, Slim," Superintendent Carter said slowly. "You're just like that old Dad of yours; stubborn as hell." He paused. "If it wasn't for one thing I'd go back down and send the law up here to get that outfit."

"What's that?"

"Why, they'd get you, too, and you'd have a hell of a time provin' you wasn't one of them." From the sound in the darkness Slim Talbot chuckled, Superintendent Carter waited a moment for the other to speak and when he didn't, added, "Well, since you're going to have it your way, get word to me in time to help you."

"I'll try, sure," said Slim. "I'll order cars to load cattle. That'll be the code. The number of cars will be the number of the train, and the date will be the day things are to pop. Two cars for train Number 2, three for Number 3 and tomorrow or Thursday, or whatever day it's to be. Understand?"

"Yes. All right, Slim," said Carter. "I'll be getting along then."

For a moment there was silence, then Slim asked, "Who's that little operator down at Redrock, Mr. Carter?"

"That's Hallie Stone. But it's too tough there for a woman. We're going to move her somewhere else. Why?"

"Nothin'," said Slim, grinning in the darkness. "She's keepin' my good coat and pants for me."

Superintendent Carter laughed; he pulled on the reins of his horse and the sound of a hoof stirred on the gravel. "Well, good-by, Slim." He reached forth a hand and groped for Slim's. They shook in the darkness. "Good-by, Mr. Carter," said Slim. "Just keep on goin'. You can't miss the trail to Redrock." The two parted, Slim silently sitting his horse while the sound of the other moving off in the darkness grew fainter and finally ceased altogether.

IF SLIM TALBOT wished he were back on his engine, instead of being on the short end of a tough proposition at Redrock, he had not so much as admitted it. It wasn't his habit to admit anything, not even to himself. He had had a hunch about the situation at Redrock. He knew what his friend Bill Cogland had thought about things there, and he and Bill had talked it over the night before Bill went to Redrock, from which trip he never returned. That was enough for him.

He was still satisfied with things when Ed Wickert one early afternoon a week after Superintendent Carter's visit, stood beside him and said: "Tonight is the night. We go in for the mail, all of us, and hang around town till after supper, see? When it's time, Curt and Pete goes down to Eagle Rock where the stuff is planted, and me and Sam and you hang around till time for Number 2, see?" The cold, flinty eyes bored into Slim Talbot's mild blue ones.

"O. K., Ed," said Slim, grinning. "I'll handle my end of it."

In Redrock later that afternoon, Slim Talbot was outwardly free and easy in his manner, but inwardly he was worried. Not for himself, but because there had as yet been no opportunity to get in touch with Carter and summon the help he needed. For until that morning Ed Wickert had said nothing of his plans; apparently he had waited for some word which Sam Winston, who had been absent from the ranch, brought at noontime.

The Limited came and the afternoon mail was distributed. Idlers on the post-office porch stood and sat about smoking, cow-ponies at the hitchrack stamped at the flies. The Lazy S flivver, weather-stained and old, was parked down the street. Slim Talbot slapped his pockets for the makings and found none. Ed Wickert offered him his sack and papers. Slim took them, but a moment later gave them back.

"I got a pipe and some tobacco down at the depot, Ed," he remarked. "Just happened to remember. It's in my tin box. Guess I'll walk down and get it. Ain't had a pipe smoke since I been in Redrock."

Ed Wickert studied Slim's face a moment with his cold flinty eyes. "O. K.," he said.

Slim started off. He turned about and asked: "Not comin' with me?"

Wickert shook his head. "Too far. I never figgered why they built the town here and the depot a mile off."

LATER Slim Talbot, easier now in his mind because there was an hour to spare in warning Superintendent Carter, entered the depot.

"Well, well, sister; you still here?" he grinned as he beheld Hallie Stone in the office. The slight brown-haired girl looked up. A smile spread over her face at the sight of Slim.

"Yes, brother," she said. "But they're moving me tomorrow."

"Well, now," said Slim, still grinning. "I hate to see you go. Redrock ain't so bad after all." Slim hastily pulled a pad of blank paper towards himself, and wrote out a message. "Here, sister," he said a moment later, "send this for me right quick. It has to go pronto." The girl took it and read:

"Supt. Tobe Carter, Whitby:
Want two cars ship cattle tonight.
Talbot."

A frown puckered the girl's forehead. "Are you expecting to ship tonight?" she asked.

"Never mind, sister, what it says. Send it. Pronto!" Slim spoke sharply, and the girl turned towards the telegraph table.

"There's wire trouble," she said. "I'm not working through to Whitby yet."

"Listen, little one," said Slim earnestly, following the girl to the telegraph instruments. "That has to go now. Now! Get me?" Hallie Stone looked up at the tense face, startled.

"Yes."

"And now have you still got my tin box with my good coat and pants in it?" asked Slim. The girl pointed to a corner of the office. "O. K.," said Slim, and he went to it, opened its battered lid, and hunted around for a pipe and sack of tobacco. He stood in the middle of the office and filled and lighted his pipe. Then with a word of good-by he walked out of the station and turned his footsteps towards the postoffice. He was easier in his mind now. For when Carter received that message, he could translate it only one way and that was that Number 2 was the train and tonight was the night when Slim Talbot needed help. Carter would load the train down with guards in the baggage cars and on the engine, and it would be all over but the shooting.

"Try some good tobacco," said Slim to Ed Wickert nonchalantly when he returned to the postoffice porch, offering him his sack. Wickert took it, turned it about in his hand and then gave it back without a word. They smoked and idled, talking little until at last Wickert gazed at the sky, already darkening, now that the sun had dropped behind the canyon walls that rimmed Redrock in. The last pony was gone from the hitch-rack.

"Soon be supper time, boys," he said. There was a stir upon the postoffice porch. Sam Winston, Curt Webber and Pete dropped off the porch and headed for the restaurant. Ed Wickert and Slim loafed a while longer before they followed.

ALL through supper which he ate sitting beside Ed Wickert on a stool in the small restaurant, Slim Talbot was busy with his thoughts. When he had filed the message with Hallie Stone it still lacked an hour before Number 2 was due to leave Whitby. That would give Carter plenty of time to gather guards and warn the train crew of the trouble, provided Hallie Stone got the message off promptly. She had said something about wire trouble. Slim knew what that meant. And then like a bolt out of a clear sky the blow fell.

Slim heard the pling of the cash register nearby, and looked up to see Hallie Stone

paying her supper check. The girl had been eating unnoticed at a rear table when Slim and Ed Wickert entered. The brown eyes were gazing straight into Slim's blue ones when Slim glanced up. The girl smiled and moved a step closer.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Talbot," she said, "but I didn't get to send your message about the cattle. The wires were so crowded when the trouble cleared up. I'm going back now and see if I can't send it."

A daze settled upon Slim Talbot. He heard what the girl had said, and thanked her faintly for the information. Wasn't that like a woman! Served him right for trusting them! A little more than an hour remained before Number 2 was due, and there was no chance now of telling Carter; no help of any kind to be expected now. But worse than that was the fact that Ed Wickert beside him on the next stool had heard what Hallie Stone had said. Wickert suddenly grew tense.

"What cattle is that?" he demanded as the girl walked out of the restaurant door.

"Search me," said Slim, grinning into the cold, flinty eyes that bored into his own.

"Search you? Don't you know?" Wickert's cold eyes kindled.

"Yeah," said Slim. "I ain't got no cattle to ship. You know that. But the pore kid was sitting down there all alone when I went to get my pipe, and I got to kiddin' her that I was a rancher and was only railroadin' for the fun when I got fired that day. And to prove it I ordered a couple of cars to ship. I thought she knew I was kiddin'."

Wicker grunted at the lie that Slim told, and turned back to his coffee. But Slim Talbot had no more appetite. He pushed away his pie only half eaten, and filled his pipe and tried to calm his nerves and figure out what to do.

He was up to his neck in a hole that was too tight for him.

And when Slim Talbot walked out of the restaurant later into the darkness of Redrock, he walked with a gun stuck in the small of his back. Ed Wickert was on the other end of the gun, and the three remaining members of the Lazy S outfit, summoned by a jerk of their leader's head, were crowded closely behind him. They went quietly out of the now empty restaurant, attracting no attention. Outside in the darkness Wickert said softly:

"Take his gun, Sam."

Slim felt his own gun lifted out of its holster. He made no move to resist, he said no word. Wickert spoke again in a moment to Curt Webber and Pete, ordering them to take the flivver and go to Eagle Rock where they were to wait until the engine with the baggage cars that were to be plundered arrived. The pair moved off in the darkness and a few moments later the flivver's engine roared out in the stillness.

"Get goin', Slim," snarled Wickert, his voice filled with hatred. "To the depot. This may be all right, as you say, but I'm goin' to find out for myself."

THE three of them entered the depot where the single oil lamp in the office offered the only illumination. Slim could see the slight figure of the girl sitting at the telegraph table when they burst in at the office door. Hallie Stone at the noise of feet, got quickly out of her chair, her eyes widened but she made no sound. Now that they were in the light, Slim saw that Wickert and Sam Winston had masked themselves with their bandannas, only their eyes being visible.

"Keep quiet, honey; don't yell," said Wickert warningly to Hallie. "Let me see that message this fellow here sent this afternoon."

"It's not sent yet. I'm trying. There's wire trouble—"

"Never mind that. Let me have it," said Wickert, his cold hard eyes upon the girl's frightened face. "Is this it?" he picked up a slip of paper from the table, and held it in the lamp light, reading it carefully. He handed it to Sam Winston who read it also. Slim meantime made no move, for either Wickert or Winston kept him constantly covered.

"Two cars of cattle to ship tonight," said Wickert gazing at Slim. "Two tonight. What do you make of it?" Wickert turned to Winston.

"Nothin'," said Sam Winston truthfully.

"Use your head," rasped Wickert. "Two tonight. Number 2 tonight. And besides you don't order cars like that. And you don't order them and expect to get them an hour later." The dead level coldness

of Ed Wickert suddenly flared up. With an oath he jerked his gun and jabbed it under Slim's ribs.

"You would, wouldn't you?" he rasped. "I been suspicious of you, and I'm goin' to let you have it right now!" The ferocity in the cold eyes would have weakened an ordinary man, but Slim only grinned.

"Yeah?" he said. He wanted just one poke at Wickert's face. One, he figured, would be enough, but if he moved the fraction of an inch the heavy bullet from Wickert's gun would plow through his body.

A DIVERSION came unexpectedly. There was the tap of light feet on the floor, and Hallie Stone rushed upon Wickert and seized the muzzle of the gun. With all her strength she pulled it to one side. Wickert began to swear. Slim swung from his ankles, putting all he had into the punch, but when the haymaker was in mid-air everything blacked out for him.

When he came to he was lying bound hand and foot on the office floor; and he realized that Sam Winston behind him had clubbed him with the butt of his pistol.

The office was quiet. Slim's head ached. He couldn't move. He tried to loosen the strands of heavy twine that bound his wrists together behind his back, but could not. He wondered where Hallie Stone was. The girl had a nerve; he remembered her small white hands and how they had seized upon the muzzle of Wickert's pistol. He wondered if Wickert had cut loose with it, but guessed not. He wouldn't be alive to be thinking about it if he had.

A red ball freight went hooting through the station. A hot box near the tail end whistled ghostlike. Under cover of its thundering noise, Slim Talbot rolled about on the floor trying to break loose from the heavy twine that bound his ankles and wrists, but he could not. He thought the strands gave a little, however, for his wrists were not so tightly bound now.

At this point the dispatcher's telephone rang. Slim's heart missed a beat, startled as he was by the sharp jangle bursting in the quiet room. He knew Hallie should be answering it, but she did not. Hallie and Wickert and Sam Winston, all three, had disappeared. If he could have got to the telephone himself, Slim would have answered it, but he couldn't. If he could reach the telephone he at least might warn the dispatcher of the impending holdup. The telephone rang again, then began ringing steadily. Soon Sam Winston came in, his face still masked. He answered the telephone and said:

"Yes. Yes. She's here. Everything's all right. O. K.," and hung up. Then Slim heard the lever of the train order semaphore swing over. He figured it out that it must have been at clear, or the red ball freight would have stopped or would have whistled for the board, and it had not done either. Winston must know something about railroading. Footsteps went outside and he heard the man say:

"Listen, Ed; that dispatcher wants to know if everything's all right, and I says yes. He says is the girl there and I says yes. Then he says to highball Number 2. That's good, ain't it? I set the board to stop Two." There was a chuckle outside, then Wickert's voice swore. "What's the matter?" demanded Winston.

"What if Slim gets loose and balls things up?"

"He won't. I hit him too hard and tied him too tight for that. He's still sleepin'."

"I should have let him have it cold. I may yet."

"Hell, I saved you the trouble."

"Kill him, you mean?"

"Yeah. Didn't I say he was sleepin'? He ain't never goin' to wake up. I just looked to see."

"How about the girl?"

"She can't get out of there. I shut the door on her and locked it. A box car is tighter than some jails I been in. But what are we gonna do with her?"

"Let her stay," said Wickert slowly. "She'll get out tomorrow. Somebody maybe will hear her hollerin' in there."

"Yeah. I thought you said you was comin' back to scare hell out of her."

"What's the use? She don't know us. She didn't see our faces. And we'll blow for a while anyhow."

THERE was no more talk, and the footsteps went down the platform. Slim listened intently. It was as Carter had said. His life hadn't been worth a nickel. They

thought he was dead. That was an advantage. They probably would not come back to the office now. Doggedly he tugged at his wrists, but he could move them only slightly inside the many strands of twine. He wanted to be free, but not too soon. He worked away quietly, hoping to break loose and watch his time for a smash at Wickert.

Slim had been lying on the floor twenty-five minutes. He could see the clock dimly above the light of the oil lamp on the telegraph table. But what about Hallie Stone who was locked in a box car? They ought to have let her alone. She was a cute kid, and what a nerve! Running into a gunplay like that. Even though she had tipped his hand, she hadn't meant to.

While Slim lay there it was so quiet that he heard a whistle echoing through the canyon. It was Number 2, which was not scheduled to stop at Redrock. She was coming slipping down through the rough country towards the canyon floor. It would be another five or six minutes, however, before she reached the station.

It would be Old Dan Carpenter pulling Number 2. He had fired for Dan in the past. Old Dan whistled closer. He was now in Redrock Canyon. He began to yelp for a clear board, for the red bull's eye of the train order semaphore which Winston had set against him would be glaring through the darkness at the approaching train. Old Dan would have to stop if it stayed red. Old Dan was whistling now to wake the dead. Even as Slim lay there listening to the sound it struck him that it wasn't Dan's hand on the whistle after all. It was more like Schultz. Schultz, so Carter had said, was back on his old run again.

Whoever it was, Slim, if he could get free in time, would throw that semaphore lever to clear, and Number 2 could go shooting through ignorant of the danger that threatened. Schultz was cussing now with his whistle, thinking, no doubt, that Hallie had gone to sleep on duty. On the floor of the office Sam rolled about in the dim light; his wrists were skinned and he felt blood on the twine. He heard Schultz shut off. It was too late. The train was stopping.

With a hissing of the air and with the pops droning, Number 2's engine rolled past the office and stopped, just as Slim jerked a skinned right hand out of the tangle of heavy twine that had bound his wrists. He sat up and with his knife slashed at the knot that held his feet. A vestibule door slammed open and somebody jumped down upon the platform, and Slim started towards the office door, moving like a shadow.

But from the doorway he saw a scene that made him hesitate. Two men were on the platform. He recognized Old Kirk Hewitt, Number 2's conductor coming with his lantern towards the office to find out why his train had been stopped. The other man was Ed Wickert. Farther down the platform Slim saw the movement of a skirt. For a moment he was uncertain what it meant, then he realized that hurrying towards the office, keeping close to the building, came Hallie Stone. Old Kirk was coming, too, peacefully paying no attention to Wickert who lurked like a sinister shadow in the dim light.

Of a sudden Slim's blood froze in his veins. For with the violence of a stabbing hand, Wickert whipped up his gun, cutting loose at Old Kirk. A great orange flame leaped out of the gun, the conductor's lantern went out and a moment later, Kirk sank slowly to the platform and fell over on his side.

The girl stepped back against the building, pressing close like a shadow, where Wickert could not see her. Slim wanted to call out to her to hide, but did not dare. A second vestibule door opened farther down the train and the light of a lantern appeared.

Wickert's gun roared twice more and the lantern vanished. Then Slim saw Wickert turn and run towards the engine.

SLIM had seen men die before. But something told him as he stood there in the doorway that Old Kirk Hewitt was alive; the manner in which he had fallen, knowing the foxy Kirk as he had for many years, indicated the conductor was playing 'possum. He wanted to say something to Kirk, but Wickert was still too close. A cold anger had grown up in Slim as he realized that Wickert was attempting to terrorize the train crew at the start. Nothing had been said to him when the plans were made at the Lazy S ranchhouse of killing

any one, and yet Wickert had deliberately fired at Kirk.

Voices cursing came from near the engine. There was the sound of a shot. Sam Winston was trying the same thing down there, probably, with no intention of hurting either of the engine crew, since Wickert must depend upon them to run the engine and baggage cars down to Eagle Rock. Wickert would cut off the baggage cars, but they wouldn't bother the coaches. That was the plan. Slim started. But two steps outside the door, he stopped. Hallie Stone stood there like a shadow.

"Slim! Slim!" she said half whispering, catching hold of him. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," said Slim. "Nothing but a headache. "Did they hurt you?"

"No. He didn't dare. I'd have scratched his eyes out. He locked me in the car, though, and I worked the end door open and got out, but I didn't get out in time to go for help." Over the girl's shoulder Slim could see Kirk Hewitt still lying on the platform.

"Kirk," he said. "You all right?" The huddled form stirred and sat up.

"I guess so. My arm is scratched, I think. It works all right. But who are you?"

"Slim Talbot."

"Slim? Hello, Slim."

Slim took hold of the girl and said, "Come on, you get inside the train. It's safe there." He pushed her towards the train and helped her up the steps, but did not follow. The girl turned and asked if he were coming, too. "No," he said. "I'm going up ahead."

"Slim!" she said sharply. "You're not going up there!"

"Sure I am," he answered. She grabbed him around the neck and tried to hold him back. "Let me go," he said fiercely, breaking her hold. "You take a look at Kirk's arm. He needs you. Kirk, you keep her here. I got business up ahead. Schultz needs me." He jumped off the coach steps and started towards the engine.

Slim went slowly along the side of the train at first, peering ahead into the darkness. Farther along he dropped on his hands and knees, crawled under the train and came out on the other side. It was safer there, for he was not armed.

There was soft dirt along the outer edge of the crown and he walked along that, making no noise. He saw nobody on that side of the train, but ahead he heard a noise of couplers uncoupling. It made him cautious until he heard the engine cough. Then he knew the head end of the train was moving. He ran hard, swinging onto a grab iron of the rear baggage car.

It was three miles down to Eagle Rock where the cars would be taken to be robbed. As Slim rode along, he discovered his head still ached from the blow Sam Winston had given him in the office. He didn't feel quite as well as he ought to for what probably lay ahead, but he wasn't quitting now. The wire trouble and the failure to get his telegram off to Carter had left him to play a lone hand. He climbed to the roof of the cars and walked forward, as lightly as a cat, jumping easily across the dark gaps that separated the cars.

At length he came to the engine tender, and climbed cautiously down upon it and across the top of the coal bin. By stooping low he could look into the cab. One glance showed him Old Craig Schultz sitting on the right hand side, his hand on the throttle, pulling the short train down the track towards Eagle Rock. On the cab deck stood Sam Winston, with an automatic covering Schultz and Ernie Hinkle, the fireman. Sam's back was to Slim. Ernie Hinkle was sitting on his seat sidewise, holding up his hands, not daring to move. Coming this far and seeing what still was ahead of him, Slim began to figure just what to do. If only he had a gun it would be easy. But bare fists against Sam Winston armed with an automatic was suicide. He sat down on the tender where he couldn't be seen from the cab, and held his aching head. If anything at all were to be done it was up to him to do it. Winston had the crew covered; it was only three miles down to Eagle Rock. Time was short. The sound of Winston's voice shouting to Schultz reached him.

"SEE that red light down there ahead, hogger? Run down to it and stop. No funny business, or I'll look at daylight through you!"

The voice started Slim to his feet. There wasn't any time to lose. Even though

his head hurt him, his legs were steady as he climbed over into the coal. There he stopped. Ernie Hinkle saw Slim in the coal and recognized him, for his foot quit its nervous swinging and he rested his heel on the edge of the seat box in preparation for whatever might happen. Slim looked at Schultz and saw the old man had his face front. He had a feeling however that the engineer would snap around on his seat like a steel spring at the first chance. Slim knew he had to be careful. If he failed now, somebody was going to get killed. He didn't want it to be himself, or the engine crew. Slim crouched in the coal preparing to jump for Sam Winston's shoulders.

Sitting there his hand rested on a chunk of coal the size of his head. He slipped his fingers under it and slowly and carefully got to his feet holding the coal in both hands. Of a sudden he leaped downward upon Winston's shoulders.

For the next moment it seemed to Slim the whole cab was full of arms and legs. All three of them seemed to have reached the bandit at the same time. The lump of coal, striking Winston on the head, shattered, and fell in a shower on the cab deck, stunning the man only slightly. Slim was underneath, then out; the automatic exploded. He saw Schultz's arms going up and down like a steam hammer, and a moment later Winston groaned and rolled out limp.

But it was only the beginning of the fight. For Schultz had shut off when it started, and before they were through, two more men with a red lantern—Curt Webber and Pete—were on the ground outside. Schultz went from one fight to another without changing his stride—it was the only thing to do. He went down feet first upon them, followed by Ernie Hinkle, and they rolled down the embankment like fighting cats.

Up in the gangway Slim crawled to his feet, holding his side and feeling blood warm on his shirt. He was astonished that he was still alive. His throbbing head was near to splitting with each beat of his pulse. But there was a fight going on down below, and he was going into it. A man came running up from the rear and Slim came thoroughly alive in an instant. He sensed the danger as the newcomer stopped and tried to draw on the fighters with his gun, endeavoring to pick out friends from engine crew.

Twice he tried and didn't shoot, because of the rolling and tumbling about. It was Wickert, who had uncoupled the cars at the station.

Feet first Slim went out on the gangway, landing upon Wickert's shoulders. The two rolled down the embankment. Slim went wild. All he knew was to kick and slug and beat with every muscle in his body. If he was hit in return he didn't know it. He was a whirlwind of flailing arms and beating fists; he wanted to kill Wickert. He was going to beat him to death. Now. He had saved it up for weeks. He slugged viciously at the round hard head, tore at his throat with hands tensed like eagle's talons. Everything blacked out on him, and he came back, still fighting. Someone had hold of his throat. His breath tightened, his eyes bulged; his legs were gone, his breath stopped. Wickert had him in a hold he could not break. He made one last wild effort. His fists struck what seemed a brick wall, and the next he knew he heard a roaring voice in his ears and felt himself lifted off by the rag of a shirt that still clung to his back. He realized that Wickert was out.

"Well, well, well!" Craig Schultz chuckled, holding Slim on his feet. "If it ain't Slim!"

"This is the Scorpion gang, Craig. There's four of them—"

"We got 'em all, Slim, thanks to you for starting the fireworks. And you're the guy I fired—"

"Yeah."

"And you had this in your head at the time?"

"Yeah."

"You've sure got my O. K. to go back to work again. But you're all bloody, boy—"

"Yeah," grinned Slim. "I got some first aid back in my tin box at Redrock. The little girl there, she's keepin' it for me. She's keepin' my good coat and pants, too. Come on, let's go back."

What Came Up on the Tackle from a Stormy Sea

The Two Lost Cases

By
FREDERICK SLEATH

THE swell was bad when the captain went ashore, but his orders were uncompromising—"Get that whiskey out of the ship before I come aboard again, if she's rolling her rails under!" So the lighters were kept alongside when they should have been sent away, and the unloading of the cases proceeded.

The swell came in from the sea in long sleepy ridges that steepened over the bar and raced into La Correga Bay with a curl that no ship could meet with any appearance of dignity. It was the very same swell that sank the battered plateships as they lay at anchor after escaping from Cavendish or some other sixteenth century English rover, and foundered the Spanish battleship in the days of Cochrane and the wars of independence, as well as many other ships of later days and less renown. The saloons on the waterfront had all a figurehead or two gracing the premises, and nearly every house in the town had some part of a ship in its anatomy. And now it was making those about the *Marianna* wonder whether there was any such thing as stability in ships at all.

Mr. Jimmy Douglas the mate knew his business and had got his weights right when he loaded her in Glasgow, taking particular care about that very important item from past experience of the nature of the port where the first part of the cargo had to be handled. The *Marianna* was in as good a trim as any ship that had put to sea. Yet she was going over till the water came in at her scuppers white and green, and her lower yards darted down like javelins about to spear their target. The lighters bobbed up and down alongside sometimes as high as the rail and higher, sometimes as low as her lowest bilge strakes. Every fifth or sixth roll she went so far over, the men handling the tackles were thrown helter skelter if they did not belay and hold on in good time. But the cases came out of the hold in a steady succession of fours, and were dropped in the lighters as skilfully as well thrown flies.

"Oh good-a man!" the little olive-skinned agent was moved to exclaim after a particularly neat delivery. "Have-a drink-a, Mista?"

He took a drink himself direct from the bottle, and spirited it out again with a series of disgusting noises. He was as sick as that! But Mr. Jimmy Douglas took no notice of him whatever, either of what he was doing or his invitation. It was not his poop, and the little guy could do what he liked with it. But what happened to the cargo was a different matter. A very different matter!

TWO miles away Captain Shaunee O'Brien sat comfortably in the draught on the veranda of the Café of the Captains, drinking iced beer with the other master mariners, and hoping his blurry Mister would somehow make a mess of it.

The swell had seemed a heaven sent op

portunity to Captain Shaunee, who had deliberately slipped out of the way to let it do its worst against his chief officer. Supplies were running short in the new mining camps up in the sierras, and if the thousand cases that the *Marianna* carried could be got ashore before another whiskey ship put in, a handsome extra profit could accrue for the owners as well as the consignees. Captain Shaunee O'Brien looked seaward every second sip or so with a gleam in his beady blue eyes of pleasant anticipation. If the lighters were sent off before the whiskey was cleared he would log his mate for disobedience to orders and neglect the owners' interests. If the cargo was lost or damaged in any part the entry would be—gross negligence in the discharge of his duties.

Captain Shaunee O'Brien had made several such entries already, and meant to leave nothing out that would make it difficult for his mate to ship as mate again, which fact Mr. Jimmy had been very much aware of since they left the Tail of the Bank behind. He had carried himself with a really commendable discretion, and had answers ready for all the charges, or thought he had, as well as a counter-charge or two which he meant to levy against the captain before the first convenient British consular official. But this swell was the devil, upsetting in more ways than one! A logging that carried the sting of loss of money to the owners! Scotch owners! With old Captain Taylor their trusted shore captain, so nicely placed to speak a prejudiced word or two! He carried on with the unloading as the only thing to be done. But every bit of him was on the job, hands, eyes, ears—everything!

He had put the second mate in the hold to look after the slings, and the bosun there also to look after the second mate, who was not too reliable.

He had good men on the preventers, and himself took the winch, and for once made its sputtering oil engine behave as its makers, intended, while Maori Bill, the best man in the ship, was out in the working lighter in charge of the receiving end. And thus they hoisted and swung and lowered all day, using the mainyard as derrick, working the unhandy gear with the skill of men who had to do such things when their lives and the lives of all depended. As dusk was coming down the job was nearly done, without a single bottle being broken or so much as the starting of a single nail.

"Last four cases!" hailed the mate from the hold.

"Can't you let us have 'em, Mister?" another voice added. "Don't you think we've earned 'em?"

THE crowd uttered a muffled, "Here, here!"

But it could not be done as they very well knew against the competition of the droughty sierras, not with a month's pay from all hands thrown in. So up the last four cases came like the others, and over the side.

Very little things are said to alter the destinies of nations, and maybe what happened was due to the above depicted small display of human feeling and emotion—a weakening of the implicit hand and eye coordination by the sudden welling up of the crew's latent longings. Maybe it was only a heavier scend of the ship's hull, giving the lighter an extra inch or two of rise. Anyhow the rising gunwale came up beneath and caught the sling before it was half inboard, and though Maori Bill managed to grab hold of two of the cases, the other two slipped from the slackening cordage and slid over the side.

Yes, it was very hard indeed to lose the last two cases in such a simple way and after such an effort. Naturally the crew swore. There was no excuse whatsoever for the little agent, who came shrieking down from the poop adjuring his saints to blast and frizzle up all hands.

"You getta no mon'!" he yelled at Mr. Jimmy. From which the crew inferred a backhander was going for someone, but acquitted the mate of participation therein on the evidence of his attitude.

"Swing Bill in!" he ordered. "Gently!"

Maori Bill was brought aboard like the ship's own child.

"Dump that!"

Two words only, spoken quietly and with no particular emphasis. But the agent was promptly whipped out of the ship like a bundle of unwanted old clothes.

"Double grog all round, steward!" said

Mr. Jimmy. "That'll do, men!"—and went below.

HE WAS very well pleased with the way things had gone. To get nine hundred and ninety-eight cases out of the ship under such conditions was no small achievement, and the proof he had given to himself of his own particular capacity was not the least satisfying and inspiring aspect of the affair. He felt fit enough to tackle anybody, especially Captain Shaunee O'Brien, who would be taken ashore and faced with the proper authorities if he tried to cast any aspersions on the part he had played. He only wished old Captain Taylor had been there to see him that day! Bessie's father!

Old Captain Taylor had proved inveterate on the subject of mates when told he and Bessie intended to get married. Captains were captains, but mates might be anything, and only a full master mariner should have his daughter's hand, after which statement the old man simply had to welcome Captain Shaunee, who came coasting along at the moment in search of a shore captain relationship. But it was captains in the parlor, and the other parties in the kitchen. And when the angry father as last vented his feelings on the matter, irritated beyond restraint by his daughter's unfilial firmness and wholly unsuspected sharpness of tongue, naturally a man like Shaunee O'Brien got wrong ideas.

Still seated on the veranda of the Café of the Captains, Captain Shaunee was drinking much harder stuff than refrigerated beer. His latest move had failed. The honors were decidedly Mr. Jimmy's—"Smart fellow, that mate of yours!" was the opinion of the other master mariners. He would have to wait a little longer before writing the letter he had planned, telling old Captain Taylor of the happy culmination of what he thought they both desired.

The swell was taking off, but he delayed his return. Aboard the *Marianna* Mr. Jimmy came out on deck and set the anchor watch, and having had a look around retired below.

The ship soon lay on an even keel in a flashing phosphorescent sea. Soft airs stirred in her shrouds, bearing the scents of earth, the languorous odors of vegetation. A moon made the sky more vivid than by day, and a great white peak loomed up above the lofty rise from the shore like a fairy reflection from the greater lands beyond the sierras. The crew gathered by the rail and looked wistfully at the illuminated town. They heard the music from the band in the square, the laughter from the nearest cafés, the clink and tinkle of the bottles and the glasses. Some even thought their ears could catch the luscious flowing of the wine. And they thought of very many things, such simple things as wet and cold and long hard passages, hunger and thirst, and girls—and cases of whiskey lying down below, the two lost cases. And finally they thought of Maori Bill.

Maori Bill sat all by himself, making trinkets for sale and weird Maori music. He was big and strong and insolently friendly, a man to be avoided in any crooked dealing, but a very obliging shipmate if approached in need and in the sacred name of his hero—Mr. Jimmy. And Bill could swim. Oh yes, sirs! It was nothing to him to go down a foul hawse and tell how the cables turned, and how much turn there was to it. Nothing!

"Say, Bill," said the oldest, cunningest seaman. "Six fathom oughta be o' no account to you? And ain't it up to yuh?"

"Your mother was a mermaid who took pay in Madame Annie's," said Maori Bill politely.

"But ain't you goin' t' go and get those cases, you bloomin' sea-ape? It's nothin' to us. But you oughta know Mister Jimmy'll catch it for losin' 'em when the old man comes aboard. And you sittin' there as could go and get 'em, easy as the cook peels onions."

Bill's garments fell from him in the motion of his rising. "I go!" he said, and tied two ropes about him, one for himself and one for the cargo. And he slid overboard like the human fish he was, and went down.

"Good chap, Bill!" said the oldest, cunningest seaman.

"A thundering good chap! The kind o' messmate as was wanted! They'd stand him a pound o' tabacker a man, and a drink all round next time they came from a pay table. . . . And he's hooked it! Say, he's hooked it! That's his wriggle! Up wi' 'em! Up, ma hearties! Two dozen o' the right

stuff! The real Mackay! A long pull for a strong pull! Ho, whiskey for ma Johnny!

A dripping case rose out of the sea, a case with one end stove in. A case that dropped bottles as it banged on the side. . . . *Plop!* . . . *Plop!* . . . That dropped still more bottles as they lifted it in. . . .*Clink!* . . . *Clunk!* Bottles that broke as they fell on the hard steel deck. But bottles still left, whole bottles inside. They tore it asunder and handed them round. Bottles of whiskey after weeks and weeks of abstinence. Good old whiskey! Drink it down!

"Hi!" hailed Bill. "My line's adrift!"

Nobody heard him. Nobody cared.

"Bugs!" . . . "Lice!" . . . It cannot be printed what Bill spat up from the sea. He swam to the cable and climbed aboard, and lay down as he was by the other anchor. It would have meant murder had he gone down at once amongst them. He knew better than that. He would wait a little while. Then he'd make them pay! Playing a trick like that on him! Yes, he'd make them!

HE COULD hear them carousing from where he lay, though they had shut both fo'c'sle doors and closed the ports to keep the sounds from carrying aft. They were gulping the potent liquor down, eager to feel the comfort of its mellow fires stealing through their hard-bitten bodies. Their talk came up to him through the ventilator in an excited burble of half-suppressed conversation, grown men behaving like schoolboys when the teacher has left the room, enjoying their interlude of stolen bliss with the soft pedal on. The feuds of the voyage were gone and forgotten, the bitter little personal antipathies of shipboard. They were all good fellows down below, swearing eternal fealty and friendship. . . . Dam' good fellows, thought the Maori, leaving him the sea to drink!

The burble suddenly wavered and resolved itself into individual voices. The starboard door opened and someone came out, scouted about the deck for a time, then climbed up the ladder to the break and peered at him.

"Say, Bill?"

Something was wrong. They had drunk all the whiskey and it had not made them drunk. It had only been sufficient to inflame their desire.

"Bill?"

"Yes!"

"You didn't happen to notice that other case when you were down?" asked the oldest, cunningest seaman. "The danged fools busted the one you sent up against the side, and we didn't get more than five bottles out o' it. No use leavin' its mate down there, is there now?".

"You want me go an' get it?"

"Sure, we do!"

"I go," said Maori Bill.

The old man nearly tumbled down the ladder with the news. "Say, boys! He's goin'!" he stuttered. "Bill's goin'!"

A flood of friendly men came out and swarmed round Bill.

"But you use the tackle this time!" he insisted. "No more cases after this one. Better not bust him on the side."

The hoist block was still at the yardarm to take in some stores the captain was bringing. It was easy to cast off the end and sink it to the bottom with a link or two of chain.

"All I says," said the oldest seaman as Maori Bill went over and down. "Bill's a very obligin' feller." All hands agreed.

THE signal came from below to haul, and they surged round the tackle. "Forgettin' him already!" snapped the veteran. "Up wi' him first! And mind, he gets the first bottle!" They surged back to Bill's line, and hauled it in till the end came dripping over the rail. But Bill was not on it! Bill certainly was not on the end!

"Where's Bill?"

The rail was lined with them looking over. No sleek black head appeared above the surface. No sign of Bill at all!

The sheave of the hoist block began to cheep, and the line surged violently as though subjected to a heavy pull. They rushed to tally on and haul. The line tautened, and held.

"Haul away!" yelped the veteran. "He's fast below!"

They hauled, but could not budge it. The line was held by the bottom of the sea. And Bill was down there!

The simple fact of disaster swept into their minds, overwhelming every other notion with the chill of its inexorable conviction. What was holding the line was holding Bill! That grip must be broken, without de-

lay and by any means available! "The winch!" . . . "Start it up!" . . . "Start it up, and pass the line! Bill's drowning!" . . . They passed the line to the drum, and swung the starting lever.

STILL warm from its daytime use the engine snorted into action and picked up its power. The drums turned in the slack and applied the strain. The stout manile cracked and whirred. The yard trembled above their heads, and the ship herself canted gently. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, the tension eased and the line began to come in.

"Heave, and bust her!" piped the veteran triumphantly, and all hands cheered.

Up through the lambent water rose a glowing phosphorescent mass that broke above the surface in a dripping shower of light and mounted heavenward at the end of the line. It was chock a block at the yardarm before someone thought of stopping the winch, and they stood and gaped at it—a long shapeless object, a branch of a tree smothered in weed and increstation, an old ship's timber. But whatever it might be, it was not Bill!

"In the waist, there?" hailed the mate, roused out of his berth by the din of the engine. "What the dickens are you doing?"

They nearly let the tackle go as they fell back from the rail. "Bill's missing, sir!" someone muttered.

Nobody noticed the white shadow of the shore boat skimming noiselessly towards them before the breeze, nor the man who stood forward of her mast and peered curiously at the ship past the luff of her sail. But they heard his voice as he hailed—"*Marianna,* ahoy!" A blast from the trumpet of doom could not have been more devastatingly effective.

"Christopher! Here's the old man!" gasped the oldest, cunningest seaman and led the rush forward.

The line ran smoothly through the sheaves, the object descended like a half-burnt-out meteor. It crashed into the sea barely a yard from the boat's side. A fountain of water rose as high as her sail, and smashed down on her occupants drenching them and nearly filling her. The captain's furious blasphemy carried all over the bay, and as if to add a final touch to their part of the proceedings the half-drunk crew came aft in a panic shouting they had seen a ghost and the ship was haunted. What they had seen was Maori Bill himself, who had been some time in the fo'c'sle watching his dumbfounded mates with the greatest satisfaction. "You rats!" swore Mr. Jimmy with visions of personal disaster, and drove them back in the best bucko style of old to discover the truth for themselves.

CAPTAIN SHAUNEE O'BRIEN came over the rail with joy flooding his venomous soul. He sniffed significantly about among the broken bottles, and took his time to play his cards well. He questioned the mates with unctuous propriety, and such of the men as were able to talk at all. Then he summoned Mr. Jimmy into the saloon and delivered his ultimatum. Mr. Jimmy could go ashore with his pay and his papers. If he chose to stay by the ship he would be disrated.

Mr. Jimmy quietly packed his chest and went.

Captain Shaunee O'Brien whistled cheerfully next morning as the windlass clacked its pawls and the cable came in through the hawse. He had got his rival out of the ship under unbelievably pleasing circumstances. A mate who let the hands get drunk on a broached whiskey cargo, and who stood on the poop while they tried to murder their captain by dropping a weight into the boat bringing him alongside, such a mate could never, never hope to secure respectable employment in any of the seas where the tale was known. And he would spread it, at every port and every opportunity! And the silly fool of a man, he exulted, did not seem to see that by leaving the ship he was losing his chance to squash the story. He was free to say what he liked both officially and unofficially, without fear of effective denial of contradiction.

THE trip to Honolulu whither the *Marianna* was bound to pick up a whale oil cargo was the longest, most tedious passage in her honorable records, but easily the most pleasant Captain Shaunee ever enjoyed. It gave him time to paint the case as black as possible in his written report to the owners, and to linger over the scandalous details with which he embellished the letter giving

old Captain the news. It did occur to him now and then that Mr. Jimmy had gone rather quietly. But such a thought was as the shadow of a solitary wisp of cloud drifting across a summer sky at high noon. The blow fell in Honolulu like a bolt from the blue.

"What's this that mate of yours has been doing in La Correga?" a master mariner acquaintance hailed him as he walked jauntily away from the quay.

"Him!" sneered Captain Shaunee, and began to tell the well-rehearsed tale.

But his friend cut him short. It was not that he wanted. The Spanish plate-ships? What about them? Hadn't he heard? . . . Mr. Jimmy had found them! . . . Mr. Jimmy was well on the way to becoming a millionaire!

Bit by bit he gathered in the news, each item and detail like a hammer blow in his brain. An obliging shipchandler was found with a sheaf of press cuttings. He read them through, and stumbled back into the glaring white sunlight like a man walking in an unlit room. It was a dramatic little story. For years a salvage company had searched for the lost galleons, and had been on the point of suspending operations when Mr. Jimmy walked in. A fifty per cent share if he showed them the place where they were lying?

That was his bargain, duly signed and sealed. And then he had showed them! Six fathom deep beneath the very spot where the *Marianna* had lain! Their grabs had already brought a treasure to the surface. Two hundred thousand pounds worth in ingots and minted gold!

"Fifty per cent of two hundred thousand!" he muttered, stumbling on.

"Yes, Captain," said Maori Bill coming up at his elbow. "Mr. Jimmy done pretty well. I tell him where those old Spanish ships are lying. I see them all there when I go down. I tie the tackle on to a bit of one the second time, and Mr. Jimmy asks What's that? when he and me clear the line. I tell him of all those old ship timbers shining down there like ghosts of trees. That's why he go ashore!"

"Then it's your half share!" exclaimed the captain, with a wild hope of still undoing Mr. Jimmy. "You found it! It's yours!"

"Mine and his," Maori Bill corrected. "Fifty-fifty! Me and him partners. See this cable, Captain! He sent for me, tell me to come. Send me money. You please let me leave the ship, eh? Gimme my discharge? Gimme it, Captain—and I give you five pound?"

"I'll give you hell first!" snarled Captain Shaunee, and struck.

Maori Bill took the blow on the slant of a withdrawing cheekbone, but went down on his back with sufficient ostentation to attract the attention of two policemen, who crossed the road and took the captain in charge. He surrendered to Bill's terms on the threshold of the jail, signed Bill off with a clean discharge, and hurried down the quay to the refuge of his saloon. Black rage was in his heart, chagrin embittered him to the depths of his soul. And Maori Bill followed at his elbow, talking of Mr. Jimmy and the ships they would buy with their money, lots and lots of ships, bigger than the *Marianna*. But maybe he would speak to Mr. Jimmy to let the captain have a job on one.

"You ugly mug!" roared Captain Shaunee, too furious to see Bill's game. "I'd have taken the skin off you and your ships, if you hadn't had those policemen so handy!"

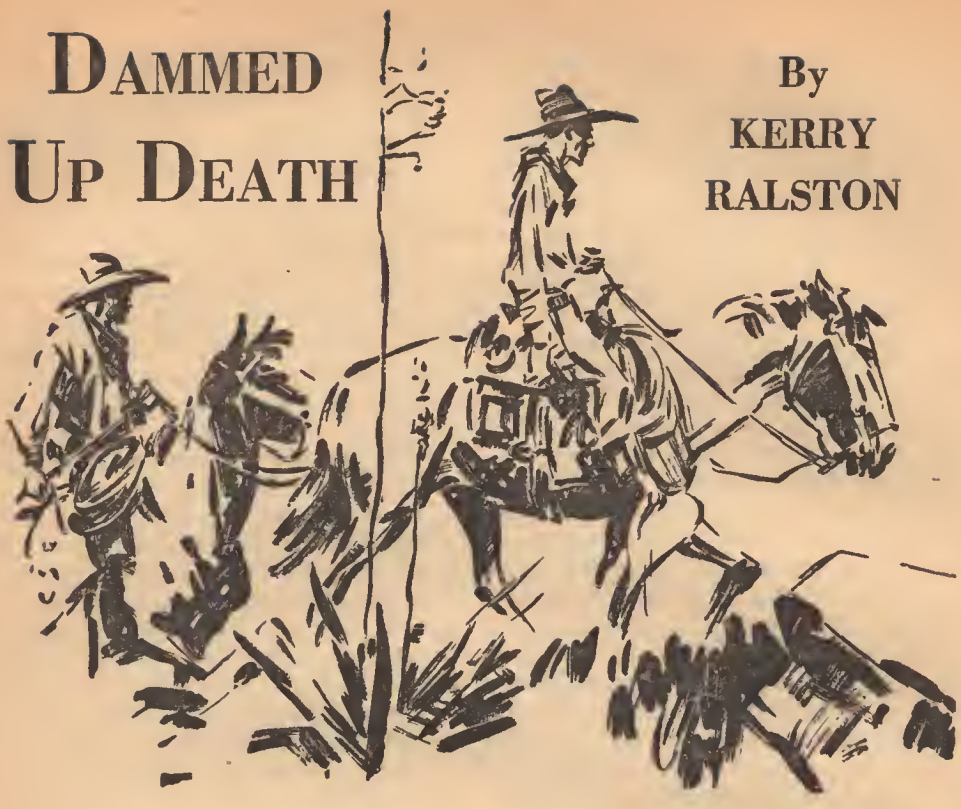
"No pleecemen here, Captain," said Maori Bill pleasantly. "That's why I come. You take my skin, and I take yours."

"Police!" yelled the captain.

But the Maori was right, and no police were visible. And without interference from any other force of law and order, Mr. Jimmy's partner administered the very father of all the hidings ever inflicted since the noble and manly art was acquired by man.

Dammed Up Death

By KERRY RALSTON



When Hell's Flood Was Roarin' Loudest Was When Robertson Shot the Straightest

"ONCE upon a time," sighed "Lace-Pants" Robertson, "there were two wandering waddies always out of work. And this is one of the onces."

"Once!" echoed his abbreviated companion, known as "Sawed-Off" Jacobs. "We're *always* out of work!"

"I said always, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Sawed-Off admitted. "For once yuh told the truth about yoreself. But I'll bet it hurt yuh so bad you'll bleed inside."

It was true that the benign evening sun of October shone down upon two jobless waddies. But that was not the sun's fault, nor due either to scarcity of work. It simply did no good to get Robertson a job. An employer can put up with a certain amount of complaint from his hired help. But Lace-Pants was a chronic objector. He took pride in having been fired in every county in four states. That made job-hunting harder, too. People were beginning to remember Lace-Pants's face.

Lace-Pants had a regular front name—Bruce. But two years ago he had sent to a mail-order house for a pair of fringed chaps. The catalogue had neglected to say that the fringe pants were tipped with tin. Ever since they had called him Lace-Pants.

"Two days ago," mused Jacobs, "we had good jobs. That Lazy S outfit was A-1. An' look what yuh went an' done!"

"I never done nothing," denied Robertson. "I only told the foreman that I didn't like his bunkhouse. It was too dark an' hot. I told him if he'd have another window cut on the west side, where we'd get a little breeze, I'd be glad to stay on an' work for him."

"Yeah. An' he told yuh to go to hell. An' I had to come along with yuh."

"You didn't have to come, Sawed-Off."

"No; but if I ever left yuh, yuh'd starve, Lace-Pants. An' I love yuh too much to see yuh starve."

Robertson heaved the deep sigh of a man who is misunderstood.

"Anyway, we got horses an' outfits an' some money," he observed optimistically, "an' winter ain't here yet. I'm kinda gettin' fond of this horse. I been trainin' him to come when I whistle."

I wish you'd learn some jobs to come to yuh thataway, yuh pore galoot."

Robertson lapsed into an aggrieved silence.

The country through which they were journeying had been somewhat tumbled and rugged. As they came to the top of the next rise, however, the land flattened into a green and fertile valley. Far up the vale to their right they could see smooth stonework; beyond that the sheen of water.

"Pine Canyon Reservoir," remarked Robertson without interest.

"Yeah; we've been here before."

"We worked here," said Lace-Pants moodily.

"I know it. I'm tryin' to remember why yuh quit."

"I can. We done some mule-skinning here when they built the dam two years ago."

"Yeah; but—"

"Mostly," said Robertson, "it was because I didn't like the mule whip they sold me at the company store. For skinning mules I like a ten-foot drover's whip, eight-plait, with a revolving handle. They never had anything but some little six and a half foot ones. Weren't even shot-loaded. I told the foreman—"

"Yeah; yuh told him, all right! Yuh naturally would."

"Supposin'," suggested Robertson, with the air of one who has grown tired of a given subject, "supposin' we ride down an' greet the caretaker, or whatever they call him."

Two tired but eager horses accordingly picked their way down the rocky trail, noses quivering with the water smell.

BELOW these dams there is always considerable seepage. The stream had cut a new channel through the fill in the old riverbed below the dam, and they had to ride some distance toward the dam to find a place with low banks.

It was noticeable that Robertson did not lean over and drink. He knelt and scooped up the water. Whether this cautious measure had been inborn as a result of similar caution on the part of his American forbears, or whether his Scotch ancestors had inaugurated the custom as first means of defense against the knobkerry of a hostile clansman, it was at least a characteristic of Lace-Pants which was important even if not pronounced.

Likewise was Robertson's offense a thing to be pondered over. He went into action, gun action, with what seemed to be an indolent indifference. Yet Jacobs had seen him beat a half dozen men to the draw by sizable margins, and it was well known that Lace-Pants could shoot the buttons off a man's vest without injuring the garment.

Having satisfied thirst, they led their mounts along the mud bank to a crossing just below the rearing concrete wall.

"Maybe nobody is at home," said Jacobs as they neared the small concrete house halfway up the other slope. "Seems like they ought to have a guard here all the time. The folks down the other valley west of this one made quite a ruckus at the time, I remember. Claimed they was entitled to the water rights. A fella name of Lop-Eared Biggers was doing their gunning for them. They caught him an' stuck him in the jug—the company did. They had the river dammed off up above somewhere with a flume to take the overflow whilst they built the dam. This Lop-Ear was caught trying to wreck the flume an' let the river down on them before the cement got set."

At the threshold of the house, a third of the way up the slope, they stopped to survey a small rosebud outlined with red stones. From that they turned their attention to a black and white stamped tin sign on the wall to the right of the closed door.

$250 Reward will be paid for the arrest and conviction of any person or persons who endanger the lives of Pine Canyon Valley by tampering with this structure.

Pine Canyon Irrigation Company.
John Mager, President.

JACOBS raised his voice.

"Anybody home?" he called.

His last word echoed resoundingly from the face of the dam, but from within the house came no sound at all.

"May be down below tending his garden," said Robertson. "We might as well shove along."

"Afraid he might put yuh to work?" asked Jacobs dryly.

"No, but—"

Sput! Something hit Robertson above the ear, bounced as though his head had been rubber, and rattled down among the rocks.

"Who threw that?" he demanded wrathfully, his gun appearing in his hand as if by instinct. No other agency could have accounted for the rapidity with which he had drawn it from its sheath. One moment his hand was empty; the next it was full.

"I never threw nothing at yuh, foolish! Something fell!" And Jacobs turned his small gray eyes upward.

The dam was built in steps, the first ledge being about twenty feet above their heads. And from this ledge he saw water coming, a stream of muddy water, cascading over the edge!

Robertson saw it a second later. The stream was widening. So did the cowboy's eyes.

"Somebody," he gulped earnestly, "ought to ride an' tell somebody!"

"Gangway, yuh loon," croaked Jacobs hoarsely, shoving him out of his path. He leaped to the door, kicking and pounding. Then he listened. Silence; nothing more.

Raising a boot, he kicked vehemently, while Robertson put his shoulder to the other side. The brass key-plate bespoke a spring latch, and the door was locked within.

Under the combined effort of foot and shoulder, however, it gave a groan and crashed inward.

As their eye pupils opened to compensate for the darkness of the interior, both saw at once the figure of a man slumped over a small center table with his folded arms. A clot of blood had matted his graying hair, some of the red fluid having run down and stained the white doily in the center of the table.

"He's dead, Sawed-Off!" Lace-Pants whispered. The sight of death, dealt by other than his own hand, frequently unnerved him.

"Yeah; but he ain't been dead long! He's warm!"

"Somebody hit him on the head, too," averred Robertson, rubbing his own ear.

"It's murder, Lace-Pants. An' they've done something to that dam to make it leak! That was a piece of concrete that clipped yuh on the ear. Remember about half an hour ago I said I thought I felt the earth tremble? We thought it might be a young earthquake somewhere. They have 'em frequent in this country."

"Dynamite," remarked Roberston methodically. "Half sticks set off one at a time on the inside. Tied to rocks to sink them."

"Fellah, we gotta ride. Get him out an' up to the top so the water won't take him if she goes—"

"Telephone," suggested Robertson, eyeing the wooden case of the wall telephone.

Jacobs lunged for the instrument. At his touch, however, the lid swung open; bits of brass and rubber and bakelite fell out. This inside was a wreck!

"Somebody has jiggled the hook with an ax!"

"Musta got a wrong number," declared Lace-Pants sympathetically.

"Yuh would try to be funny, yur poor sap! Grab his feet! Whistle to that buzzard meat o' yourn. Get him on it an'—Great Godfreys! Look at that water shootin' out of there now!"

Robertson eyed the stream pouring over the edge above them all along a spot ten feet in extent.

When he looked back at Jacobs the latter was already swinging to the saddle. A clang of shod feet among the rocks; then Jacobs was riding at breakneck speed southward along the seepage. Jacobs was going to warn the valley.

"Betcha he thinks he's Paul Revere," mused Roberston. "Always leaves me to carry the dead!"

BEFORE starting for safety, Robertson made a methodical search of the inner room. There was a child's crib in one

far corner, in addition to an antique four-poster and dresser denoting a married state. But no signs of either wife or small daughter. That it was a daughter he knew, for in the crib lay a rag doll, neatly tucked away until its small play-mother returned.

He took it up, thrust it through his gun-belt.

"Too late to save her daddy," he muttered moodily. "Maybe save her kid, anyway. Ugh!"

He had lifted the dead man over one shoulder and started out, whistling for his horse. And the man had begun to drip blood.

Once again Lace-Pants looked up at the stream. Bigger every minute. The water was eating into the wall, cutting, cutting. Rotten concrete, too, probably. Lot of graft. He never had liked that concrete gang foreman.

Darting a hasty last glance around, he flung the limp body across his saddle, speaking reassuringly to the animal that bore it. The horse smelled the blood.

Before leading it up the trail, however, he paused, ripped the tin sign offering the reward off the face of the wall over the flowerbed, rolled it into a cylinder, bent one end flat and stuck it in the pocket of his gray shirt. He was not letting the prospect of a bath in a few billion gallons of irrigation water dull his outlook upon the serious things of life.

Five minutes later he stopped on the ridge above, overlooking the dam and the water behind it. The reservoir was about half full.

Far below he saw the aperture through which the water was pouring onto the ledge and over. Bits of the structure were peeling off from the force of the jet.

"Funny thing, water," he observed to himself. "Little bit is life; too much is death. Ugh! *Dammed up death.*"

He slid the limp body of the watchman from the saddle, lowering it to the ground, where he propped it up against a boulder.

"Wonder will Sawed-Off make it?"

From his position he could not see Jacob's wild ride down the valley. A beak of the ridge farther south obstructed his view.

Leaving the body against the rock, he picked his way out on the apex of the great pile until he could look down the "V" of the valley. Jacobs had come to the first house. Roberston thought he could see people running out. Then he was sure that horses were being driven in—a buggy appeared from a shed.

Roberston turned, picking his way. The roar of the water below, although the stream was not visible when he stood on the upper tier of the dam, was unnerving.

As he turned he caught a splash of rifle flame and smoke fifty yards away among the scrub trees of the canyon. The impact came almost with it.

It was like a club hitting him high in the ribs.

He spun halfway around, lost footing and rolled over the outer edge.

Forty feet below the water roared through the breach with increasing violence. Chunks of cubic feet went out, blocks of a cubic yard. The whole structure trembled.

An ominous cracking rumble; then a crash and chaos as the tons of water swept everywhere before them.

A MILE and a half down the valley, it was Jacobs's lot to see his partner and friend begin the fall which he knew could result only in certain death.

Jacobs had not spared his horse.

"Yuh can make it," he grunted to the panting animal. "Yuh made it!"

They tore through lowered bars at the first cottage on the trail. A man came running out with his white shirt-tail streaming behind him.

He had evidently been changing his clothes—getting into his best suit to go to town.

"What is it—what's wrong?"

"The dam," shrilled Jacobs. "It's goin' out!"

"Great God!"

"Have yuh got a telephone?"

"We can 'phone the powerhouse. They'll blow their whistle."

Shouting orders, he ran for the house with Jacobs trailing after him, panting a disjointed account of what they had found at the dam.

A hired man bolted for the barn, coming out with a gray mare which he backed

between the shafts of a cut-under buggy. Excited tones came from within, telephoning, the jangle of the bell as they cranked out the power house ring.

"No wagon—my truck's out of order. Hurry, Marthy! Are yuh—sure that Prell was dead?" he asked, turning again to the breathless cowpuncher.

"Prell—was that his name? I never examined him close, but the whole top of his head was caved in. Musta been hit with a club—from behind. They may have got him outside an' carried him in there. I never noticed no bloodstains on the floor."

The rancher gave a deep groan.

"Joe Prell—dead. And I got him that job! He was crippled, one knee was stiff. He married my sister, Dorothy. She and her little girl went to visit some cousins of ours over on the other side this morning. I'm expecting them back any minute. John Mager, my name is."

He hurriedly focused a pair of large field glasses on the dam, lying in shadow up the canyon. Only the top was white and gleaming, where the lowering sun struck it horizontally over the top of the left wall of the canyon.

"There's somebody walking out on it," he declared. "Somebody—"

Jacobs did not know who was walking out on the tottering crest of the dam, but he had good suspicions.

"Gimme them glasses," he gulped, grabbing them from the other's hand.

As he put them to his eyes the gnat-like figure crawling along the dam seemed to totter, fall and roll. For a moment he was visible against the skyline. Then he was gone.

A puff of dust in the valley obscured his view.

When next he could sight the dam the whole objective had turned yellow with flying spray; the straight edge of the dam had nicked into a V, and Lace-Pants was gone.

Jacobs sobbed aloud.

"It's out," cried the rancher. "Quick, Martha! It'll come a mile a minute. Don't try to save anything. Oh, God! What have we done to deserve this?"

Blindly groping for his stirrup, Jacobs mounted, riding alongside the buggy toward higher ground to the west.

"It'll take everythin'," wept Mrs. Mager. "Our house, our young fruit trees, our—"

It had already taken Robertson, thought Jacobs, hard eyed. And somebody was going to pay. He'd make somebody pay!

WITH a sound like distant thunder, the unloosened torrent began a charge down the helpless valley.

Whipping the stumbling gray into a lope, Mager made for the nearest point of height.

"It'll spread out pretty much before it get's here," he breathed. "My stock is all still farther down."

The water was a tide that waited neither for man nor beast. It took boulders the size of a wagonbed to its bosom, tumbling them like straws. On it came, roaring, furious, a battle line that swept even the earth away, down to bedrock.

Below them the electric siren on the roof of the power house had been screaming intermittent blasts of three, the warning known to every dweller in the valley. It suddenly stopped. The turbines had slowed and died, the power was gone. A line of cars was moving from the cinder lot in front of the low red brick building; workmen fleeing for safety to the elevation.

Reining in, Jacobs looked back across the valley.

He saw the crest hit Mager's pretty little white and green-trimmed house, toss it, swallow it. Mager's wife was weeping softly behind him. They saw it tear through the orange grove beyond it; the trees were gone, all save a few toward one edge, and these had been stripped in a half-dozen seconds of every leaf and twig and vestige of bark.

There were not many houses near the dam, but twenty homeless souls were gathered here on the swell, ranchers and their families, and they had seen their life savings wiped out as quickly and completely as chalkmarks from a blackboard.

"It's over," sighed Mager.

It was over. But Jacobs, much as he sympathized with them, was not thinking of the damage, nor the receding tide, nor the bleak gulch it had cut so ruthlessly through what only an hour before had been a nest of happiness and fertility.

He was thinking rather of Robertson, his partner and friend. Straining his eyes while the yellow giant swept past, he had not been thinking of the devastation, but of Robertson's body. Had he seen the mangled remains of his friend swept past?

Probably not. More likely Lace-Pants was buried under tons of concrete and silt up at the shattered dam.

Reviewing their three years of association, he felt deep regrets. He had often spoken harshly to his friend. Accused him of being lazy and shiftless, and nagged him continually on the subject of work. If Lace-Pants were here now, Jacobs would never nag him again.

Hazily, Jacobs was aware that John Mager, president of the now defunct irrigation association, was speaking to him warningly.

"KEEP still about what you found up there. There'll be a mob and some lynchings if it gets out now. We'll ride up that way. I can take my gray mare here. Lap-robe in the buggy."

Jacobs nodded understandingly.

Mager was taking his horse out of the shafts when another buggy came up from the west. The rancher turned swiftly to greet a young woman who nearly fell as she leaped out. A small child, crying with fright, tried to climb out after her.

"Did it—is Job safe?"

Mager's head hung as he put out a hand to her. Then he looked helplessly at Jacobs.

"Tell her. This is my sister."

"I'm afraid he's dead, ma'am," Jacobs managed to say miserably.

He was glad to make his escape with Mager, leaving the woman weeping in Mrs. Mager's arms.

Along their right as they rode lay the yellow gully cut by the water. A hundred yards across it was, with banks nearly straight up and down. As they made their way toward the dam progress became more difficult.

The brink of the bank was precarious; the canyon wall closed in and made the trail narrow.

"Have to get down in the bottom," decided Mager.

The bottom was practically all rock.

"We thought we heard a kinduva rumbling noise," Jacobs was saying. "Anyway, the way Prell was slugged shows it wasn't an accident. Whether it was dynamite or not, somebody did something. Me and my pardner worked up here two years back. I remember some hard feelings at the time. Just before we rode up to the dam we were talkin' about that, Lace-Pants an' me."

"We sent Lop-Eared George Biggers to the pen for two years," said Mager slowly. "Were you here then?"

"He was sent up from the September term of court," said Jacobs. "We worked here two weeks early in October. Almost exactly two years ago. According to that, Lop-Ear is out now!"

"Yes; I hadn't kept track of when he was sent up. But you're right. By heaven, If Lop-Ear did this for personal revenge, he'll be easy to find! And he'll be easy to trace!"

The real force of the water was more clearly imprinted upon their minds a little farther on. It was unbelievable that virgin rock could be eaten away in so short a time. Yet there was the mark, deep grooved into the cliffside. It had been a sloping wall before; now it was straight up and down.

They found pieces of the dam, solid concrete, a quarter of a mile from the breach, pieces large as box cars. And here the way became even harder. They had to thread between giant slabs, jumbled in fantastic heaps, with the horses snorting their dislike of the insecure footing.

It took them nearly a quarter of an hour to make the quarter of a mile.

Jacobs felt qualms as he approached. Several times on the way up he had tried without success to reconcile himself to the future alone—without Robertson. And now, as he neared the scene of the tragedy, he was filled with a terrible fear. He did not want to stumble onto Robertson's body, protruding from under some jagged slab. He would rather that the body were never found.

From their position in the cut, neither could see where the watchman's house had stood. The wall was straight up on that side. Added to the utter transformation of the whole canyon into a picture that was

totally strange, even Mager could not say definitely where the house had been.

Nearly to the dam, however, they could look up.

Jacobs felt his whole body give a wild tremor.

The dam had not burst at the break. The greater pressure near its middle had eaten it out mostly toward the center. The house still stood, stark up from the wall. The wave had shorn away the rose garden in front of it, but had spared the edifice itself.

And sitting on the doorstep with his feet dangling into twenty feet of space was a man!

"LACE-PANTS!" gasped Jacobs weakly. "Is that you?"

Robertson stared soberly down a minute. He was chewing tobacco.

"Yeah," he replied warily. "I think it is."

"Wh-what are yuh doing up there?" faltered Jacobs.

"Nothin' right now. Just a-settin here."

"Th-then what *were* you doing up there?"

"Well," declared Roberston calmly, "after I seen that the water left the shack I thought I'd sneak back an' put the doll back to bed. I thought it might be sleepy."

"Doll!" echoed Jacobs. "What doll. "You're crazy!"

"Rag doll," said Lace-Pants complacently.

Jacobs groaned deeply. "I'm afraid he's shot somebody," he explained in an aside to Mager. "He gets these spells. How did yuh get up there?" he called to Roberston, raising his voice again.

"I never got up. I came down."

"But I seen yuh fall over the dam!" cried Jacobs in desperation.

"Never fell over. I was pushed. A bullet pushed me."

"A bullet! Are yuh hit bad?"

"Anyway," finished Roberston, "I never went all the way over. I caught myself an' hung on the edge by my fingernails. That old dam sure jumped up an' down."

"I thought yuh always kept yore nails bit short," sighed Jacobs, staring helplessly at Mager.

"I forgot to bite 'em lately. What I was saying, I hung on the edge till them three hombres back in the brush rode away, thinking I was dead. Then I climbed up an' high-tailed for solid ground. Blooey! She went out. Sure was a lot of water. Do any damage down below?"

"No," said Jacobs weakly. "Only about a billion dollars. Those three hombres—"

"Yeah; I rode after them three."

"Yuh rode after—oh, lord! Go on—tell it, can't yuh?"

"Two of 'em got away," admitted Robertson disconsolately. "But I winged the third one an' he'll do enough talking. He dern near got away, too. Had a fresh horse an' mine wasn't. Lucky thing for me that his cayuse stumbled about a half a mile down. That's how I got him."

"Where is he. What—"

"SAWED-OFF, I think that third hombre is that Lop-Ear you were speaking of this evening. His pockets were full of sawdust, and I found an empty dynamite crate a piece down the valley."

"Biggers!" cried Mager harshly. "Did he have a nick out of his left ear? Where is he?"

"Yeah; I noticed the nick. Well," chuckled Robertson, "he's loppier than ever now. I figgered I'd shoot him in the trigger arm, but I didn't want to kill him, so I just nicked his *right* ear first. He reached up with his right arm to see how much damage was done an' then I got him. About that time his horse stumbled an' threw him an' he started up a little cut between two boulders where I couldn't ride after him. So I had to shoot him in the left leg, too."

"You—shot his ear, from the saddle?"

"No; off his head. Oh, yuh mean was I in the saddle. Yup; that's where I was."

"And then," said Jacobs, "what did yuh do?"

"I tied his right leg and his left arm together and drove my horse through the loop."

"He means," explained Jacobs, "that he put this Lop-Ear on his horse, tied his hands an' feet underneath an' brought him back alive. Where is he now?" he asked, shouting up.

"I got him tied up there. Sawed-Off, I—I feel sick."

"Sick," echoed Jacobs anxiously. "Did that bullet get yuh bad?"

"No; it never hit me at all. Yuh know that tin sign that was sticking on the wall. Well, I had that rolled up in my shirt pocket. I'll throw it down an' I want yuh to look closely at that sign, Sawed-Off."

The rolled placard bounced below; Sawed-Off Jacobs dismounted and scooped it up.

As he unrolled it he saw where the bullet had hit.

Precisely on the line between the figure 2 and figure 5 of the $250 reward was a hole. As it stood it read $2.50 reward!

"I don't blame yuh for feelin' sick," sighed Jacobs. "If you was pure Scotch instead of halfbreed the shock would have killed yuh. That ain't no money at all!"

"It wasn't that," said Robertson, staring soberly down. "Yuh remember that old duffer we found inside with his head bashed in? Well, I'd left him up there propped up against a boulder whilst I went after them hombres. Sawed-Off, when I got back that old duffer had *moved!*"

"Prell!" cried Mager. "Prell wasn't dead! Did he—is he—"

"No; he ain't dead. I brought him down an' put him to bed. I found a razor an' some sticky tape in the medicine chest in the bedroom. I shaved his head where he'd been hit an' found a little piece of bone pressing down on his machinery. I just lifted it up with the point of some scissors an' stuck some tape on it. He got better rightaway."

"Thank God!" said Mager devoutly. "Is there some way we can get up there? Can we move him—"

"This here is Mr. John Mager. His name is on that reward sign," explained Jacobs. "That Job Prell is Mr. Mager's brother-in-law. I don't want yuh to call him a 'duffer' no more."

"Pleased to meet yuh," said Robertson. "Yeah; I'll throw yuh down a rope."

HIGH noon.

"I think we done right in not taking that reward," said Jacobs as they rode west.

"Mager said he'd pay it. He said they could borrow enough to pay us that full $250. He just laughed about that hole through the sign. He's a right fine fellah, that Mager. Lace-Pants, I honestly can't see why yuh won't agree to stay right here an' work. They sure would treat us right after what we done for 'em. There'll be plenty of work."

"I'd rather go somewhere else."

"Yeah; but how are we gonna eat?"

"I don't know how we're gonna eat, unless it's with our fingers, same as we've always done. I couldn't stay around this valley."

"But why, yuh hopeless prune?"

Robertson looked thoughtful.

"Notice that Miz Dorothy Prell? Cute, ain't she? Well, I'll tell you, Sawed-Off. I think she took a kinduva shine to *me*. Just by the way she looked at me. Yuh know I love women an' kids. I couldn't linger around here, Sawed-Off. She ain't even a widow yet."

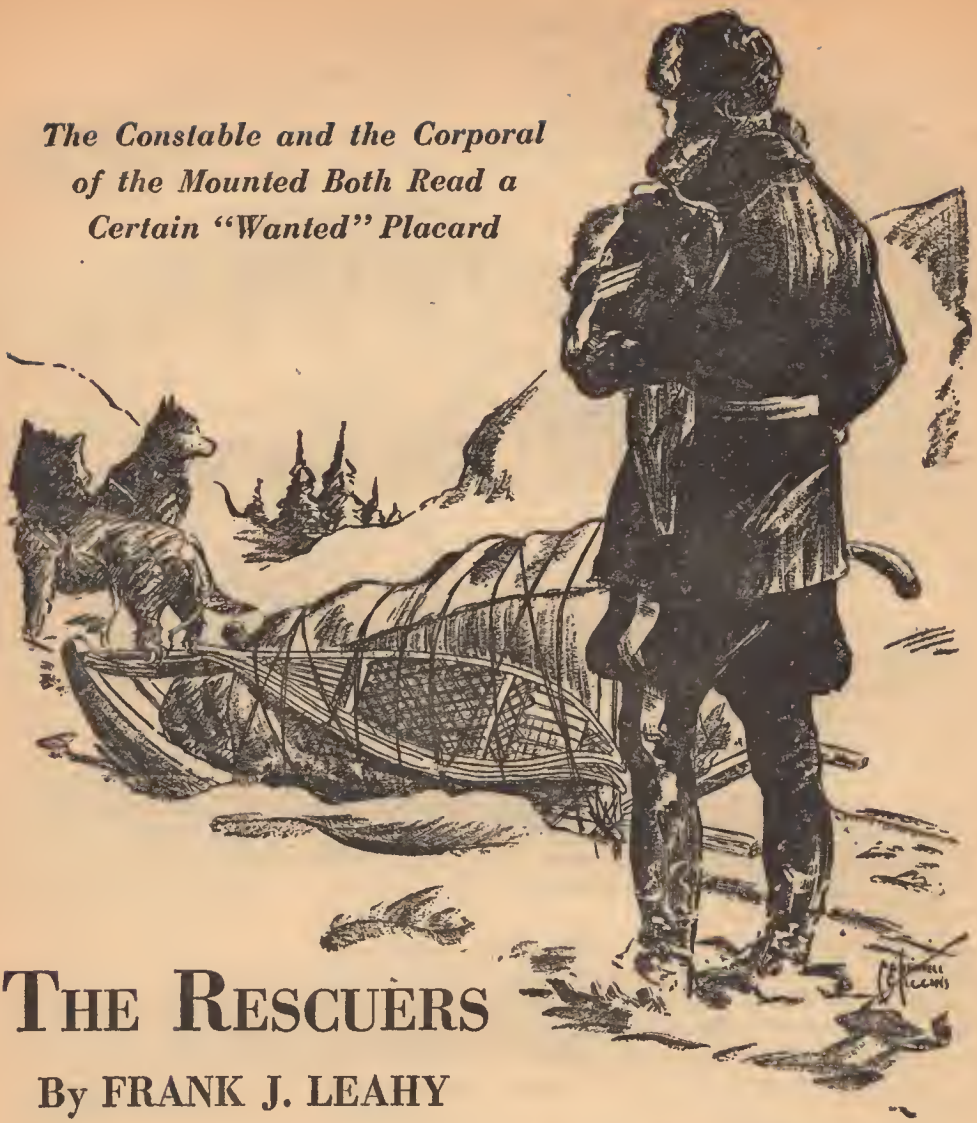
Jacobs regarded him in deep disgust.

"If others spoke as highly of yuh," he began, nagging again without knowing it, "as yuh do of yoreself, it sure would be easy to get yuh a good job. Can't yuh get it in yore head that we're outa work? We're always out of work."

"Are you thirsty, Sawed-Off?"

"Some. Why?"

"I think that's a town up there," declared his friend. "Maybe there'll be a saloon."



The Constable and the Corporal of the Mounted Both Read a Certain "Wanted" Placard

THE RESCUERS

By FRANK J. LEAHY

CORPORAL GALOWAY'S set gaze focused upon the twisted mass of wreckage far down on the opposite slope of the wooded ravine. Then he looked at Constable Neilan, at the head of their string of panting dogs, and shook his head.

"No," he said, with sudden grim decision. His grip tightened on the gee-pole and the dogs sprang to alertness in the traces. "We've no time to bother about that now. Let's go."

But Constable Neilan stood fast.

Seven hours ago he had been one of three men standing in the office of the Royal Canadian Mounted post at Moose House. The two others were Corporal Galoway and Inspector Farr.

The inspector, a graying veteran of two wars, with the rigors of the frontier imprinted deeply on his bronzed countenance, had dynamite in his makeup when he ordered tersely: "Bring in John Kelleher—alive if you can, dead if you must."

And Corporal Galoway had echoed the concussion when he replied, with a nod, "Yes'r."

A strong man, the corporal; a soldierly blonde of a man, with a hammered-copper mask of a face, beaten into shape by the sun

and cold of a dozen years he's served on the Force. His eyes, gray as ice, had that look in them of defiance of all odds. The inspector knew a thing would be done when he commanded Corporal Galoway to do it.

Constable Neilan was of a deeper shade than the corporal, of a softer texture. There was nothing sheathed about his dark eyes; they were warm without being too friendly, direct without being penetrating. One might say that he had not yet grown cold in the crucible of Life; he was still pliable, human. A youth, he was inclined to inquire into the nature of things; to investigate, even at his own expense. He was new on the Force. Corporal Galoway was capable of bringing in his man alone, if the thing were at all possible, but the inspector chose to send Constable Neilan along for the experience.

THE inspector turned to the bulletin board and tapped once a "WANTED" placard, on which, below the rogue's-gallery photograph of a hard-faced, dark-haired man, thirty-two years of age, was set down in black and white the crime career of John Kelleher, escaped convict, murderer, bank robber, "phantom desperado."

The two younger officers had read the notice a dozen times before, but they read it again now, studied it carefully, without remark. The inspector turned back to his desk, picked up a slip of paper.

"Here's something else," he said. "The words—verbatim—telephoned, long distance, from Prince Rupert, just a few minutes ago." On the slip was scribbled, *"If you want John Kelleher, he'll be at his cousin, Ed Donnell's place, on the Turnagain River —tonight!"* He handed it to the corporal. "It may be just a crank's idea of fun, but I rather think it's a red-hot tip."

Constable Neilan was reading over the corporal's shoulder.

"So do I," he vouchsafed.

"A tip," the inspector added, "from some Kelleher henchman-turned-rat, perhaps. It's worth investigating, anyway."

"We'll do our best," averred Neilan quietly.

Corporal Galoway glanced icily sidewise at his subordinate, without registering other eagerness of expression than a short nod of his head.

"Let's be starting," he said.

He turned to go. Neilan followed.

"Ah—Corporal," called the inspector. They halted. "There might be a sergeancy in this for you."

The faintest of smiles crossed the corporal's lips. Constable Neilan's ready grin, however, was broad.

"I'll see that he gets it, sir," he promised.

THEY started while the morning was still young. A string of wolfish dogs, harnessed to a birch-bark sled, suffered the burden of their scant trail equipment and what arms and ammunition were thought might be necessary should Kelleher choose to fight it out. On snowshoes, in advance of the dogs, toiled Neilan; at the rear of the sled toiled the corporal; and change about when, after a while, the last roof-tops of the far-flung post faded out behind them.

They traveled on without speech; here crossed a level plain, there entered a dark spruce forest; once followed, until it horseshoed, a frozen waterway; became swallowed up by the unqualified desolation, where the crunch of interlaced frames and the swish of sled-runners seemed an impertinent traffic without license. As the day advanced the trackless solitude became more rugged. Trackless, but the corporal knew the way.

He called a halt for a nooning in a wooded valley walled in by bald peaks. Neilan tried to converse over their little fire, but was encouraged by no more than a nod, a shaking of the head, or a succinct monosyllable.

The constable believed that Corporal Galoway was thinking hard—mulling over plans which, on rare occasion, he voiced—about a certain dark-haired girl, daughter of the Moose House Trading Post's factor. She'd waited a long time for him; a long time had he waited for a sergeancy. Once the corporal had said, in that terse way of his, "It's love versus hard times."

Well, chances were now he could set up that man's castle. The taking, dead or alive, of John Kelleher should certainly warrant an extra bar on the sleeve, the inalienable right to marry. Corporal Galoway was a tempered-steel tenon on the tradition of the Mounted at any time; now with his career

at a crossroads it seemed as though Kelleher's time was short.

Into the sunless afternoon they mushed over the glaciers, where trembling avalanches hung and the snow in the black, sharp shadows was hard-packed by the centuries. Up there the air was bitter cold. Tiny whirls of gritty snow blew like sugar and dusted their furs and the bristly coats of the dogs with frost. They topped the height of land; without pause descended to where pines, bearded with alabaster moss, grew again. Then, where a vast stretch of lower country, criss-crossed with ravines, lay open before them, they stopped, panting steam. Below them—frozen, motionless, silent, like a thread dropped carelessly from the sky's gray loom—lay the Turnagain. But, as far as the eye could reach, not a wisp of smoke, not a roof-top.

Powdered snow streamed in the wind; they turned their backs to it and, in so doing, brought their scrutiny of the lonely panorama to focus upon something strangely out of order amidst the neat cleanness of the pine-tops. Far down, on the opposite slope of the wooded ravine yawned below them, was that twisted mass of wreckage.

It was a plane. A silver-winged monoplane. Its single motor was buried, its fuselage was distorted, its wings were crumpled. Because it was of the cabin type nothing could be seen of its occupant, or occupants. One thing, it hadn't burst into flame; its pilot must have cut the switch at the last moment. How long it had been there there was no way of telling. Not days, because it was bare of snow. Perhaps only hours, or minutes.

"Tough," murmured Constable Neilan.

The corporal nodded, said nothing.

AS THEY stared, a slight movement amidst the wreckage suddenly caught their attention. Corporal Galoway quickly brushed the ice crystals from his eyelids, sharpened his glance. Neilan started, involuntarily took a step toward the abrupt downward slope of the flat-topped mountain they were on, pulled up.

"Someone alive down there!"

They stood quite still for a minute, watching. Finally the corporal shook his head.

"I guess not."

But the constable was insistent.

"I'll bet money on it."

The corporal shrugged, turned, took a gun from the sled and fired it into the still air. At the sudden sharp crack something scurried away from the wreckage into the trees.

"Timber wolf." He put the gun away. "Let's go."

"Wait." Neilan continued to stare down. "That was a wolf, all right, but just the same there may be someone—"

"No." The corporal's grip tightened on the gee-pole and the dogs sprang to alertness in the traces. "We've no time to bother about that now."

"Then we can take time."

Corporal Galoway glared gravely at the constable.

"Are you trying to give me orders?"

Neilan shook his head, but none of the quiet determination went out of his eyes.

"We can't let a flier die—if he is alive—just 'cause we're after Kelleher." His tone was strained and hard. "Kelleher and his whole gang don't mean that much to me."

The corporal blinked.

"What he means to you doesn't count," he replied harshly.

Neilan's eyelids narrowed. He nodded curtly.

"All right. If that's the way you figure, go on to Ed Donnell's alone, then. I'm goin' to look over that plane, if it's the last thing I ever do."

The corporal's jaw set hard. He started toward Neilan, reached and gripped the younger man's shoulder in steel fingers. There was ice in his eyes, defiance stamped on his whole countenance.

"Get going," he commanded. "Yes or no?"

Neilan's jaw was set, too. He looked straight into the corporal's eyes, his own dark glance saying plainly, "You may be Corporal Galoway, but you can't bluff me." While his lips built the one word:

"No."

But the corporal was determined otherwise. Inspector Farr's words, "There might be a sergeancy in this for you," rang in his ears. He had memory, also, of Neilan's promise. "We'll do our best." Their best, in the case of John Kelleher, meant the wasting of no moment in closing in upon him. It was a sheer, perilous descent into the

ravine; it was still many a weary mile to Ed Donnell's place; and night wasn't far off. He wasn't the man to argue beyond a certain point; he suddenly closed a fist and brought it up like a rocket to take Neilan on the point of the jaw, a cracking blow.

Neilan sagged, fell heavily, out cold. For a moment the startled dogs kicked up a fuss in the traces. The corporal quieted them, straightened them out, dragged Neilan to the sled and piled him on. Then without so much as another glance at the wrecked plane, he bawled "Hi-yaw! Mush! Billy!" and drove on over the sandpaper crust of a trail for Ed Donnell's place on the Turnagain.

FOR several minutes he avoided a direct glance at Neilan.

He'd put all he had into that punch. Fair enough; when the youth came out of it, perhaps he'd realize that a corporal was not to be crossed by a boot constable. But, somehow, as the dogs raced along the mountain, the corporal's conscience began to hurt him a little. He tried to concentrate upon nothing foreign to Ed Donnell's place, but Neilan's words, "We can't let a flier die—if he is alive," kept throbbing in his brain to the tune of the dogs' fleeing pads.

In spite of himself, he had a memory flash of a day down the years—when, on the long trail, while bringing in a prisoner—a fur thief—he had tumbled over the bank of a frozen waterway and broken his leg. He saw again the thief pouncing upon him, unarming him, making away with dogs and all, leaving him to suffer and die; saw again the thief's deliberate return; heard again the fellow's words, "I can't do it, Galoway; somehow I can't believe my freedom's worth more than your life."

A thief! With a long prison term facing him, he'd set his captor's bones and taken him in to the post. Measure that lawless chap against his own self now! Corporal Galoway, of the Mounted, deserting a cracked-up flier who might, as Neilan believed—might!—be alive; turning his back on one police tradition to serve another—and his own selfish ends. Neilan was right. A possible act of mercy came first. Kelleher could wait. And if Kelleher didn't wait—

With a shout at the dogs and a dexterous handling of the sled, the corporal swung over the back trail. The action brought young Neilan out from behind that stiff uppercut. The constable felt of his chin for a minute, looked around, and a light of satisfaction finally dawned in his dark eyes at perception of what the corporal was toward. In no time they were back at the point where the wrecked plane could be seen again.

Neilan stood up. The corporal approached, laid a mittened hand on his comrade's shoulder for a brief instant.

"Sorry I did that, fella," he said.

Neilan's grin was ready. He nodded.

" 'S all right. I can take it."

They peered down the slope dropping away at their feet. It was a breakneck place. And even if they succeeded in getting to the bottom without accident, the ravine was so arranged by the gods as to wind off at right angles to the valley of the Turnagain. Which meant they'd have to climb straight up again; and that—with a wounded, if not dead, flier on their hands—promised small possibility of their reaching Ed Donnell's place tonight.

"It means good-bye to Kelleher," said the corporal ruefully.

"Oh, maybe not," replied Neilan. "He certainly won't leave the minute he gets there."

"He might. He's probably only stopping there to cache—or get—some of his loot."

"Then I'll tell you what," said Neilan suddenly. "I'll go down to that plane alone. If the pilot's not dead, only broken up a bit, I'll stay with him and you can go on to Ed Donnell's. Then, when you've put the screws to Kelleher, you can drop by this way for me—for us—see?" He started away. "That's the way we'll do it," he added, with finality.

The corporal grabbed him.

"Hell, fella. I know you've got guts. But we started out together, and we stick." His fingers tightened warmly on Neilan's arm, let go. "Ready now? Lead off."

They went over the verge of the steep place like driftwood over a wave-crest. Almost immediately Neilan slipped. His snowshoes flew away, and he bounced back up just in time to veer off from crashing into a snow-laden pine. But his task of picking a trail for the dogs was child's play. It was the corporal who had the worst of it. That sled

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pulling at him was a live thing; it fought him; and his heels plowing into the frigid crust of white were no brakes at all.

The end came quickly. The sled suddenly turned over, sideslipped, jerked to an abrupt halt. And there the outfit hung by the traces, the sled on one side of a stark tree bole, the enraged dogs on the other.

It was amidst that confusion that a mysterious something began to be felt—a terrible something, soundless at first, its voice rising as, on a sudden, the snow began to shoot out from under the men and the hung-up team. It seemed as if the whole mountain was moving.

It was an avalanche!

The snow of the winter, and of other winters, bristling floodlike with fallen pines and pines which it felled, roared down the slope with swift-gathering momentum. The corporal and Neilan, torn away from their outfit, were whirled into the monstrous cataclysm. A fire-blackened stump slithered between them; like drowning men grasping a straw, they grasped it and tumbled with it, amidst all the rest of Nature's debris, down the mountainside. One moment they were immersed in the avalanche, the next they tobogganed along the surface, and in another they were whirled into the air. Down and down, faster and faster, they dropped, with the thunder of fighting logs in their ears, with the winter's moving carpet choking them with white dust. And then, at long last, the bottom of the ravine—and blackness.

A minute passed, and then Neilan, wormlike, crawled up from oblivion into the world, his face blue in ghastly contrast to the hoariness of his furs. He gasped for breath, smeared at his eyes, looked all around him, dazedly.

"Corporal!" he shouted suddenly.

No answer. Silence—save for, far up the mountainside, the pitiful yelp of a sled-dog; and even that quickly weakened and ceased.

"Corporal!"

The frozen wind howled at the word. There was no Corporal Galoway. A great loneliness seized upon Neilan; he threw it off as the up-tilted stump to which he'd clung suddenly drew his attention. The corporal, too, had been clinging to that! A hope sprang up in Neilan, and he bent at once to

pawing snow, down the trend of the stump, like a dog for a buried bone. His fingers weren't claws, however, and pretty soon he was spraying spots of blood behind him, as well as snow. But he kept on, burrowing deeper, frantically, dreading—hoping.

The top of a head finally appeared. He scratched around it and the corporal's face, blue and strained, twitched; and ice-gray eyes opened—only there wasn't any ice in them as they lifted to Neilan. After a little the two men crawled out of the hole.

THE corporal sized up the situation.

"Outfit buried, eh?" he asked.

The constable nodded.

"I heard Billy—sayin' good-bye."

The corporal shook his head sadly.

"Billy always was a friendly dog," he muttered.

And that was the epitaph of the lead-dog Billy, less scant, perhaps, than their own was likely to be.

Neilan pulled himself erect, started off suddenly through the loose swell of snow. The corporal watched him quizzically for an instant before he understood. The wrecked plane on the farther slope still worried the constable; their own predicament was of secondary importance to him.

The corporal followed. It was a man-sized struggle floundering through that log-hampered accumulation from the tall mountainside; and when they were finally out of it, where the crust was still unbroken, it was every inch another struggle up to the twisted mass of wreckage.

It was a small plane. The wings were so crumbled the numbers on them were all jumbled up, but along the side of the fuselage ran a black arrow pointing to the name, Firefly.

"Why, say!" blurted the corporal. "I know who this is."

Neilan was pulling at the cockpit door.

"Who?"

"Bart Mason. Carries mail, or anything, for a piece of change."

They both had to strain at the door to get it open. It might have been their imagination, but, besides body-warmth, there seemed to be a not-yet-cooled engine-warmth inside the cockpit. That was possible; the whole front end of the ship was nosed into the snow, out of the frozen wind. Possible,

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too, that that warmth had saved the pilot from freezing.

He was still alive—just barely breathing. They extricated him from the jam he was in down under the instrument panel; straightened him out and felt him for broken bones; found the only things broken were two rows of front teeth. There was an ugly wound over one ear and a bad cut over one eye, and the blood from each, although it had cease flowing, streaked his whole face like Indian war-paint and spotted his swaddling of fur and soft-tanned leather. His hair was a rusty red.

In a shoulder-holster he wore an automatic pistol.

"So you know him?" queried Neilan.

"Not personally, no."

"Oh, I thought you said—"

"I said the plane identifies him. Bart Mason's been barnstorming the Firefly over these mountains a couple of years."

WHILE the corporal set about building a fire in the snow, Neilan rummaged around inside the ship. There was a partly filled mail sack, which he didn't attempt to open. There were two vacuum bottles, one of them empty; a box of sandwiches, a carton of cigarettes, a bear-skin robe and a pair of snowshoes. These things he tossed out to the corporal. Then both of them lifted out the flier and bundled him snugly in the robe; laid him by the fire. The corporal washed the fellow's head wounds with snow, forced a little warm coffee between his lacerated lips.

But the man didn't come out of it, even then.

"Good thing we came down," remarked Neilan.

The corporal grimaced.

"Yeh. Rescuers in need of rescue ourselves."

It was growing dark in the ravine and it was starting to snow.

"We'd better erect a shelter," suggested the corporal.

They wrenched one of the battered wings from the plane and set it up as a windbreak. They'd completed the task before they discovered that the flier was watching them. His eyes were black—dark with pain and fever, probably. His lips moved, but the sound that issued from them was

unintelligible, because of his broken teeth and swollen lips. However, the corporal gave him an answer:

"We're Galoway and Neilan, of the Mounted. You're Bart Mason, aren't you?"

The man's head nodded a little.

"Bad crack-up you had. I don't s'pose you could tell us how it happened?"

The man tried, but it was no use. Thirst-fever, risen from pain, had dried his tongue, and his lips shaped an appeal for water. But there was no water. The corporal gave him a mouthful of snow, but the man spat it out and pressed his jaws with his mittened hands to warm the ache of his broken teeth.

Shortly he closed his eyes again and lay quiet.

PITCH darkness came, and they huddled, in the bitter night of mountain stillness, round the chilled warmth of their campfire. The snow, like a pall, came down about them in a silent, soft descent. Presently, far up one glooming slope, a wolf howled dismally. The flier stirred and the corporal administered another sip of coffee. They had no food of their own, so the corporal and Neilan wetted their own tongues with the bottled liquid and ate a sandwich apiece; then, turn by turn, they stood watch over the sick man and the fire.

It snowed all during the night, and it was still snowing when dawn broke to reveal, away in the sky, the cloud-fleeced heads of their mountain jailers.

"Got to get out of this now," said the corporal.

"Where to?" asked Neilan.

"The post, of course."

"We're not goin' on to Ed Donnell's, then?"

The corporal snorted.

"With no dogs, no food, and this chap on our hands? Oh, no. And, don't forget, our guns buried with the outfit."

Neilan nodded, glanced down at the grounded flier.

"He's got a gun."

At that instant the flier struggled up to a sitting posture, sat weaving, holding his head in his hands.

"Think you can travel?" asked the corporal.

The poor chap didn't seem to hear.

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"Well, you've got to try," bluntly.

The three of them breakfasted on one of the four remaining sandwiches—scant fare, indeed, for men, one with a head cracked several ways, and two with many dull pains in their bones and joints. Then, without word, they started, heading in the direction that should, eventually, give them exit to the post trail. The corporal wore the one pair of snowshoes, pressing out a footpath for the others. The flier followed him, at first staggering like a drunken man, then just limping along painfully, with an injured hip. Neilan brought up the rear, carrying the mail sack, sandwiches, vacuum bottle and cigarettes in a robe-bundled pack.

It continued to snow. The hurrying flakes soon veiled all sight of the wrecked plane and of the mound of debris-bristling white that had brought this Kelleherless return to the post to prick the rescuers' consciences. Return? Would it be their fortune, good or bad, to ever again stand in the cozy warmth of the post's office—to hear, perhaps, Inspector Farr's reprimand, "Did I send you out as Good Samaritans, or did I send you out as policemen?"

But the business of helping one in trouble didn't end for the policemen with having merely pulled the flier from the plane. The fellow's hip, it turned out, really had him in a bad way. His limp became more pronounced and slowed the march to little better than a crawl. Several times he stumbled and fell headlong. Often he stopped to rest, and, finally, his crash-awful features became so distorted with pain that it was plain to be seen he could not go on that way.

"But you've got to go on, somehow," the corporal told him grimly. "You're our only alibi for making a mess of our jobs."

Thereafter the corporal broke trail and shouldered the pack, too, while Neilan made a human crutch of himself. And change about.

In that way, footstep by floundering footstep, they pressed blindly on through the ravine—three lonely figures, leaning forward in the universal grayness, slowly drinking up the endless distance.

Along about noon they halted, built a fire, drank the last of the coffee and broke

another sandwich among them; and went on. The ravine gradually broadened out, one slope lowered its summit to them and, in the deepening afternoon, they climbed up to where the frigid wind whipped them cruelly and the ceaseless flakes pelted them like bird-shot. Heroic toil, that helping a fellow and bucking the winter on a morsel of food.

THE flying chap's bad hip didn't get any better with the miles they were putting behind them. He favored it all he could, hung like a millstone about the shoulders of one or the other of his rescuers, but he groaned with each step, and these groans turned at last into rasping oaths, which the wind tore to shreds and scattered over the Northland trail. At the fall of darkness, when a bleak camp was made, his many agonies had him out of his head, and for a while it took every ounce of the corporal's and Neilan's strength to hold him down. Then, when he did sink off, he raved all night in delirium.

"Some fun!" commented Neilan.

"We'll have to build a sledge," asserted the corporal grimly.

They hacked down several wind-swept saplings with their pocket-knives, then, to the stoutest two, laid parallel to one another, they bound cross pieces with strips sliced from the bear-skin robe. Of some vines which they found they made hauling traces; and they had their sledge.

They were weary enough then as they flumped down on a coverless couch of pine-boughs they'd laid by the fire.

"We might go into the knick-knack business," remarked the corporal. And he added deliberately, "We certainly missed our calling as policemen."

"Oh, we're not doin' so bad," replied Neilan.

"Think not? You don't know Inspector Farr. He'll eat us up."

"Let him. This poor guy would be dead now but for us. That oughta mean something to the inspector."

"It will," averred the corporal sardonically. "It'll mean to him we've missed the best chance the police have yet had to corner Kelleher."

Neilan shrugged a little.

"I have no regrets."

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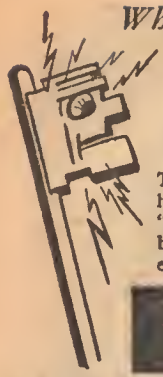

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"Well, I have," bitterly.

"You mean about the sergeancy?"

The corporal said nothing.

"You may get that yet. At least, we're savin' the mail."

"That mail!"

"Well—"

"Probably some newspapers and a half dozen picture post cards."

"Maybe," said Neilan. His eyes were on the sick man, whose head was pillowed on the mail sack. "And maybe not. We might take a look."

"No. Get yourself some sleep. It's all we have to go on—sleep—and one more sandwich."

THROUGH another endless night they suffered the tortures of men put to the test of endurance. They hugged the fire—scorched one side and froze the other; listened to the triumphant howling of the wind; dozed; wakened with a start, to automatically feed the dying blaze; got up, beat their blood into circulation; packed snow into the vacuum bottle, heated it, drank a little themselves and ministered to the feverish thirst of their patient; time and again.

And they cursed the tardy dawn.

The storm ceased, to cheer their starting. Only the sun appeared, to burn away the clouds and stab their eyes with snow-glare. Across the wilderness, where peaks and ridges glowed primrose and misty gold and ice crystals flashed back the morning flare, the corporal and Neilan toiled in the traces of their improvised sledge, doing the work of dogs. The flying chap lay quiet behind them, eyes half open, seeing nothing, saying nothing, for all the world like a dead man.

It was a stiff, crawling climb to the height of land, then, once they were on the other side, it was a case of floundering through drifts and picking a trail through thickets of timber and crossing valleys from range to range.

So through the second day the policemen-turned-Good Samaritans matched themselves against the Northland. As the sun vanished, the pace had become a stumbling shuffle; and as another darkness rushed over them they were exactly nowhere but in another camp—with a fire and nothing to feed their

exhaustion but snow-water, boiled a vacuum-bottleful at a time.

"See here, Mason," the corporal said suddenly, "how about sharing that robe with us tonight?"

But the man was in a coma, eyes like glass, just hanging on to life by the fingers of his pain.

The corporal and Neilan shared the robe with him, notwithstanding; bedded down, one on either side of him, and in an instant both were asleep. The fire died down, the wind crept into their hearts, and in the morning it was Neilan who awoke first and built a new fire to melt the ice in their blood.

Daylight was still an hour away, but they started off in the darkness to haul again, dog-like, the man who couldn't help and wouldn't die.

PRESENTLY the sun had them again, to blind them with the sheen of white. Slowly, with miseries crackling all through them, they struggled on. They paused often to rest, but for them there was no rest. Coupled with the pierce of the cold were the pangs of their starvation. Feverish, they many times cupped snow to their mouths, only to feel the hot-cinder burn of it. Thought blanked out in their brains. By rights they should have been worrying about deferred sergeancies and uncaught desperadoes; but they felt only a sullen will to save the life of the wretched flier, keep their legs moving, one after the other, hour after hour, to the exclusion of everything else.

Blasts of snow-sand caught them, as if shot from a battery; grimly they shouldered through, sucking air into their lungs. They tottered, they stumbled, they clambered over obstructions on the trackless trail; they were dying on their feet, but they wouldn't give up. Iron men against the wilderness, with a fluttering life for a stake.

On a sudden, though, Neilan's attention quickened. His whole body stiffened. He stopped, and his hauling comrade stopped with him. He blinked his nearly frost-locked eyes and stared fixedly ahead.

"Look!" he shouted.

The corporal's lowered head snapped up. "What?"

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Neilan pointed off across the hummocked plain of white that sloped away before them.

"Can't you see? A dog-team! Two dog-teams!"

"Coming our way?"

"Sure are. Can't you—" Neilan broke off, peered around at the bewhiskered, grimy face of the corporal. "Say! Snow-blind?"

Corporal Galoway nodded slowly.

"Can't even see you, fella."

"Ah, gee, that's tough."

"Funny you didn't get it."

"It's the best man always gets the worst of it," said Neilan. "I've been keepin' my eyes closed all I could, leavin' it to you to show the way."

"And I've been leaving it to you," replied the corporal. "That means we're only maybe on the trail to Moose House."

"Well, anyway, we didn't do so bad."

The corporal wavered on his feet, suddenly sat down in the snow.

"You promised," he muttered, "we'd do our best. You promised the inspector that." There was a sardonic note in his voice; he lost it with the query, "I wonder if that's the inspector coming?"

Neilan flumped down beside him.

"I wonder. Too far off yet to see."

They continued to wonder for a minute more. A minute and no more. They tried to stay awake, but inaction got the better of them, and curiosity and snow-glare suddenly blacked out.

TWENTY-ODD hours later they found themselves standing again in the office of the Royal Canadian Mounted post at Moose House, facing Inspector Farr. There was dynamite in the inspector's makeup, but, strangely enough, it didn't explode, even after Corporal Galoway—from behind dark glasses—had given a condensed report of a cracked-up plane, an avalanche, and named the man brought in as not John Kelleher but Bart Mason.

"Bart Mason," replied the inspector finally, "took off from Prince Rupert an hour or so before you fellows left here for Ed Donnell's place. He had a passenger for the Moberly Mine, on the Finlay. He also had mail, to be dropped off at several points."

The inspector picked up a packet of printed leaflets from his desk, tossed it down again.

"That was one piece of mail," he explained. "A notice that the government is now offering a reward of ten thousand dollars for the capture, dead or alive, of John Kelleher." Again he paused, this time to open a drawer and take out a packet of currency and waggle it before the eyes of his subordinates. "I'm sending this south today. It's loot—twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of loot—from a Vancouver bank recently held up by Kelleher. It, also, was in the mail sack you salvaged from that plane."

The corporal's brow furrowed, Neilan's mouth fell open, and a little smile weltered across the inspector's lips.

"Bart Mason's passenger, holding a gun, ordered the plane landed soon after the take-off. He kicked Bart out and himself flew the Firefly away—for Ed Donnell's place. I got the story, by telephone, only yesterday—right before I started out, with Chinook Charlie, to see what had happened to you fellows."

"Then—" the corporal began excitedly.

"You've brought in John Kelleher, yes. No wonder you didn't recognize him, all banged up as he is, and with his hair painted red. Furthermore, who ever suspected Kelleher could fly? It certainly solves the puzzle of his phantom disappearances." The inspector stood up, rounded the desk, held out his hand to the corporal. "Congratulations."

But Corporal Galoway shook his head.

"Neilan first, if you don't mind, sir," he suggested.

The inspector's smile broadened. He nodded, took one of Neilan's hands; and the corporal took the other. The constable grinned.

"Gee—what the hell?" he said. "I—that is—well—Kelleher woulda died, anyhow. I—"

"That's just it," Inspector Farr cut in. "If you hadn't been the Good Samaritan, Kelleher would have died and the law wouldn't be able to hang him."

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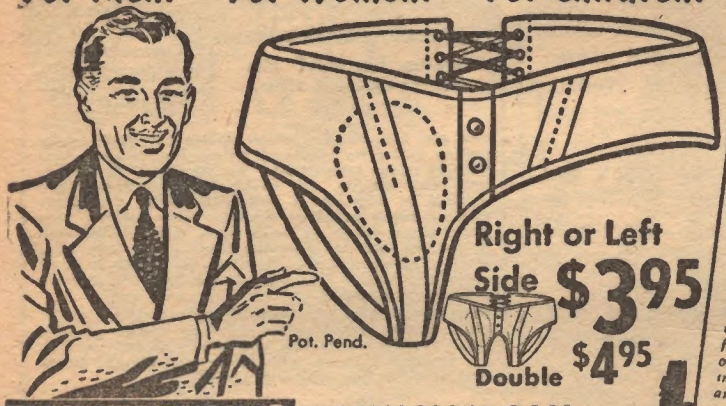

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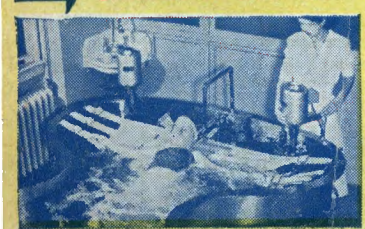

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